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# THE SCOTS LITERARY TRADITION

*An Essay in Criticism*

*by*

John Speirs

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*To My Wife*

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## Introduction

THIS book is an attempt to focus as a whole and with regard to its bearing on our present problems (as far as that may be possible without distortion) the literary tradition in Scots. This has necessarily tended to give the book in its implicit (and occasionally explicit) application a socio-logical bias. But I have tried to bear in mind that 'sociological' criticism, as much as 'psychological' criticism, is a deflection from pure 'literary' criticism; and that criticism of literature—to be itself and not another thing—must remain 'literary' criticism.

It has seemed for long urgent that the cultivated, whether Scottish or English, should become more sufficiently cognisant of this tradition as being a whole and as being something distinct from the southern. Realised as such, its powers might have a chance to become effective both as an enrichment and as a corrective.

For a Scotsman to become fully aware of himself it would seem even necessary that he should realise his Scottish past as something at least

partially distinct from an English past. For an Englishman perplexed by a sense of exhaustion, in some of its directions, of the English language and tradition it might even be to a limited, but not unimportant, extent revitalising to grow aware also of the Scots and its resources. A fresh realisation, involving a fresh revaluation, of Scots poetry might at the very least help to correct the tendency to narrow conceptions of what poetry is, such as have from time to time since the seventeenth century damaged English poetry. In general it may perhaps be taken as axiomatic that we cannot be enough conscious at a time such as the present (when they are threatened with neglect and final extinction) of the traditions upon which our intellectual and spiritual life has depended.

## PART ONE



## Fifteenth Century Scots Poetry

THE assumption to start from is that the Scots poetry of the fifteenth century really matters to us only when we feel in reading it that it is something as immediate to us as the work of any modern. But to feel it as so immediate is to feel it as what it is, and that is mediaeval poetry; it is different in important respects from modern poetry. To enjoy it, any more than to enjoy any kind of poetry, we cannot be passive. There must be some effort on our part to stand outside the changes that with time have taken place in that most important part of our mind which is part of the European mind. We cannot know whether the effort is worth making till we have made it. But the study of poetry is a means to enlarging the scope and correcting the balance of our sympathies. The study of mediaeval poetry may help, in particular, to correct the balance in important respects in which the exclusive study of later poetry will not help.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> To take a literary instance: if we came to Shakespeare from as frequent reading of the mediaeval poets as we generally do from the reading of the poets since his time, our appreciation of his work might in some respects be different and, perhaps, juster.

The Scots poetry of the fifteenth, and of the beginning of the sixteenth, century is still mediaeval. It has much in common with other mediaeval poetry in other European languages. This is perhaps the most important fact not only about the Scots poetry but also about the Scotland of the fifteenth century. Europe had a general life, and neither Scotland nor its poetry was separate from it. The poetry is early (and, as I hope may appear, the most complete and valuable) Scots poetry, and, at the same time, a late development of mediaeval European poetry.

This poetry has had little critical attention. The direction the criticism of it seems to have taken has been towards establishing Chaucer as its sole fountain-head. This seems to me at once an oversimplification. The extraordinary variety in Chaucer will not account for the extraordinary variety of fifteenth century Scots poetry. It is as independent of Chaucer as was possible for it to be, allowing for the fact that it also is mediaeval and that Chaucer was its immediate predecessor. As time went on the separation became greater. There are degrees of separateness from Chaucer in fifteenth century Scots poetry.

## *The Kingis Quhair*

THE *Kingis Quhair* is the mediaeval Scots poem which is nearest, not merely in the time of its production, but perhaps in itself, to some of the poems of Chaucer. Exactly how far the poem is derivative from them is not so easily determined as may at first seem. Chaucer and the poet of the *Kingis Quhair* had something in common which they shared also with other mediaeval poets. It was not merely that they read and learned from the same poems. Their habit of mind was mediaeval. It was a habit of mind for which allegory was the natural expression. Our difficulty is to enter into this habit of mind and to understand and appreciate allegorical poetry. The central mediaeval poetry is allegorical, which is not the same as saying that the best of the Scots mediaeval poetry (which is very late mediaeval poetry) is the allegorical; there are reasons for saying it is not; but unless it is possible for us to appreciate the allegorical poetry it must remain doubtful whether we really appreciate the other exactly in the right way.

The *Kingis Quhair* cannot be dismissed as a mere conventional exercise in the courtly manner of Chaucer. The following passage, which is remarkably similar to a passage in the *Parlement of Foules* (183-203), may help to illustrate some of the ways in which it is equally alive.

Where in a lusty plain took I my way,  
 Endlang a river, pleasant to behold,  
 Embrowdin all with freshë flouris gay,  
 Where through the gravel, bright as ony gold,  
 The crystal water ran so clear and cold,  
 That in mine erë made continually  
 A manner soun mellit with harmony:

That full of little fishes by the brim,  
 Now here, now there, with backis' blue as lead,  
 Lap and playit, and in a rout can swim  
 So prettily, and dressit them to spread  
 Their coral finnis, as the ruby red,  
 That in the sun upon ther scalës bright  
 As gesserant ay glitterit in my sight.

And by this ilkë riverside alow  
 Ane hyë-way then fand I like to bene,  
 On which, on every sidë, a long rawe  
 Of treis saw I full of leavis green,  
 That full of fruit delitable were to sene,  
 And also, as it come into my mind,  
 Of beastis saw I mony diverse kind.

The landscape is a mythological landscape: it is

not merely decorative. The 'lusty plain', the 'river', the 'hyë-way', the 'treis full of fruit delitable' (reminiscent of the Garden of Eden) are mythological. They belong to that garden which is in the centre of mediaeval poetry, and which, if we think of the diversity of bird, beast and fish in it rather, perhaps, than the personifications and gods and goddesses who are also important, is partly the garden of 'kinde'. Bird, beast and fish in it symbolise that intuition of the unity of all kinds of being which seems to have been very strongly present to the mediaeval mind but which we have partly lost. In itself it is perhaps pagan, though, of course, it is not necessarily incongruous with the Christianity of the Middle Ages, in that a Christian poet could easily find a place for the garden and all the bird, beast and fish in it in some hierarchy of God's created being. There is no suggestion in the passage of any conflict between what it represents and something outside it.

The clarity and definiteness of the images ('gravel bright as ony gold', 'crystal water',<sup>1</sup> 'backis blue as lead', and in a later passage, 'tur-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Roman de la Rose*—Chaucer's translation I. 125, the river

Tho saugh I wel  
The botme paved everydel  
With gravel ful of stones shene.

ture white as chalk') is very notable, perhaps because they strictly serve the purpose of a meaning outside themselves and yet paradoxically an inner meaning; they have none of the externality of the images in the later more simply—yet more elaborately—'pictorial' allegorical poetry in which if there is a meaning it has got separated from the imagery to the disadvantage of both. To put it another way, the imagery here has not yet begun to develop independently of the meaning into a rhetorical life of its own.

The same cannot be said of the passage in the *Kingis Quhair* descriptive of the lady. There is more life in the garden than in her; she is less deeply felt than the leafage of the trees. There is a significant difference also between her and her counterpart, the Emelye of the *Knights Tale*. Emelye springs into life in the same breath with 'the lilie upon his stalke grene', with 'the rose colour', with 'the sonne up-riste'. She gathers flowers

To make a sotil gerland for her hede.

Thus, while the description is strictly conventional, it gives that impression of freshness, naturalness and simplicity which is so often noted. But the lady of the *Kingis Quhair* is dissociated

from the garden, and, in the description of her, jewels are substituted for flowers. The 'plumis' on the lady's head are said to be like the 'flowr jonettis' and others like the 'violettis', but they are plumes, not, as in the case of Emelye, flowers. The poet speaks of

Beauty eneuch to make a world to dote

but the emphasis is on the lady's 'array', and in that there is a coruscation of jewels. There is very much jewel imagery also in the fourteenth century *Pearl* (II, stanzas 6-10; IV, stanzas 17-19; XVII, stanzas 83-86) but there it is either in itself symbolical or part of a symbolical landscape;<sup>1</sup> its purpose is to separate, so that there may be no possibility of confusion, the world of the vision from the ordinary world. But in the *Kingis Quhair* passage the jewel imagery suggests merely the ornaments of a princess of a court. It is associated, indeed, with fire:

grete balas lemyng as the fire . . .

About her neck, white as the fyre amaille  
A gudely chain of small orfevery,

from which there hung a ruby

That as a spark of love so wantonly  
Seemit byrning upon her whitē throte,

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of it is from *Revelations*.

but in other respects it is without symbolical significance. It produces something of the hard glitter of the later fifteenth century rhetoric in the gardens of which the flowers have also turned to jewels. The passage is more 'advanced' in a not wholly healthy sense, not only than the Chaucer, but also than the first passage. The decay and death of allegory is implicit in it.

## Robert Henryson

CHAUCER'S total achievement, and, to a much lesser extent, probably Dunbar's, exhibits from its beginnings through its maturity to its decay a continuous development, and in this sense is complete. Henryson's, on the other hand, is, though considerable, fragmentary. The *Moral Fables* and the *Testament of Cresseid*, which form the bulk of it, give the impression of being the work of an old man. His total achievement has not (though this does not necessarily follow) the range of Dunbar's, nor, except in the *Testament of Cresseid*, the intensity. It is narrower in this sense without (except in the *Testament*) the compression Dunbar's has.

Not that compression is in itself a test. The complexity of Chaucer's *Troilus*, for example, is not appreciable in a single line, as the complexity of a Shakespeare dramatic poem very often is. It becomes appreciable, because of the diffusion, only after one has been reading for a considerable stretch. Henryson's *Testament* appears to have been done at greater pressure not merely than the

rest of his work, which is probably inferior to it, but than Chaucer's *Troilus*, which is superior to it. The two poems are of course totally different, but why the *Testament* is felt to be the less satisfactory, in spite of its pressure, is because it presents a much less complex balance.

Henryson is on the whole more 'popular' than either Chaucer or Dunbar. This is less immediately obvious in the *Testament* than in the *Moral Fables* and certain of the minor poems. The majority of the *Fables* are based on a Latin text of Aesop. But a number are drawn from the popular Reynardian cycle, and a broad folk element is present throughout. The Chaucerian refinement of the verse, French and Italian in origin, is crossed in the *Fables* and in the *Testament* by the native alliterative type (of which the *Sum Practysis of Medecyne* is a superb example).<sup>1</sup> The verse is re-invigorated (as Dunbar's is also) from this source. Certain of the minor poems, on their part, bear an obvious relation to the ballad.

<sup>1</sup> Sevin sobbis of ane selche, the quhidder of ane quhaill,  
The lug of ane lempet is nocht to forsaik,  
The harnis of ane haddock, hakkit or hail,  
With ane bustful of blude of the scho bak,  
With ane brewing caldrun full of hait caill,  
For it wilbe the softar and sweitter of the smak.

'Smak' concentrates the pungent flavour. Cf. 'Make the gruel thick and slab'—(*Macbeth*, Act IV, Scene 1). The ingredients of Shakespeare's witches' cauldron are obviously drawn from a similar source in 'folk' speech.

This more 'popular' quality of Henryson is both his strength and his weakness. He is more 'popular' because he is more 'local'. He is further from the European centre than either Chaucer or Dunbar (perhaps partly because he is a 'clerk', not of the court). Yet he is not more Scottish than Dunbar. It is unnecessary to go into the question of national characteristics. The verse of Henryson and Dunbar is Scottish in the first instance because the idiom it is written in is Scottish (or later came to be known as such). Mr. Harvey Wood remarks of this language, 'It is not a spoken, historical dialect of the Scottish language at any period; but an artificial, created "literary" language'. The fact remains that this 'literary' language was created out of a staple of 'spoken' language. The reason why there can be no 'literary' Scots today is because there is no longer a 'spoken' Scots.

It now remains to reinforce these opinions by an examination of the poems themselves in some detail. Henryson is not, of course, so 'local' as Burns, nor would it have been to his advantage in his time; but to be just as 'local' as he is does give him certain advantages. It is already a criticism of the *Fables* to say that it is from them that these advantages may be most readily illustrated. The

following is from the *Swallow and the Other Birds*:

The samyn season, into ane soft morning,  
 Richt blythe that bitter blastis were ago,  
 Unto the wood to see the flouris spring,  
 And hear the mavis sing and birdis mo,  
 I passit forth, syne lookit to and fro,  
 To see the soil whilk was richt seasonable,  
 Sappie, and to receive all seedis able.

Moving thus gait, great mirth I took in mind,  
 Of labouraris to see the business,  
 Some makand dyke, and some the pleuch can wynd,  
 The harrowis hoppand in the sowers' trace:  
 It was great joy to him that luvit corn  
 To see thame labour baith at even and morn.

There is substance in the joy. It springs from the poet's feeling for the 'business' of the 'labouraris', the 'harrowis hoppand', and the soil 'sappie, and to receive all seedis able'. Through his identification with a locality, and the strenuous activity of the labourers therein,<sup>1</sup> the poet secures a fuller and firmer identification with the general life of the earth. It is related to the moral wholesomeness

<sup>1</sup> Cf. in the same poem (*Fables*, stanza 261):

The Lint ryipit, the Carll pullit the Lyne,  
 Rippillit the bollis, and in beitis set,  
 It steipit in the burne, and dryit syne,  
 And with ane bittil knokkit it, and bet,  
 Syne swingillit weill, and hekkillit in the flet.

of his work. It may be said to have imparted a wholesomeness to the 'morality' which in a narrower sense he inherited. The passage implies that his background was not simply (as might be inferred from such a poem as the *Abbey Walk*) the late mediaeval church.

Another way in which the poet's being 'local' was a source of strength may be illustrated from the description of winter immediately preceding the above passage. The poem from which the passages are taken begins on the theme of the Nature of God, passes to the planets in their spheres, all creatures in their degrees—expressive of the mediaeval poet's inner sense of harmony, a harmony omnipresent in Henryson's work—and passes, by an appropriate transition, to the changing seasons, summer followed by autumn. Up to this point what the poet is beginning to present is the processional pageant of the seasons well within the mediaeval convention. The life in it—

And Bacchus, God off wyne, renewit hes  
The tum Pyipis in Italie and France

—is rather the remote life of Italy and France than Scotland. But with the description of winter there is a distinct change brought about by the sudden assertion of the poet's 'locality'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. in the same poem, *Fables*, stanza 262.

The flouris fair, fadit with frost mon fall,  
 And birdis blythe changit their notis sweet  
 In still murning, near slain with snaw and sleet.

The dalis deep with dubbis drownit is,  
 Baith hill and holt heillit with frostis hair;  
 And boughis bene laifit bare of bliss,  
 By wicked windis of the winter wair,  
 All wild beastis then from the bentis bare  
 Drawis for dread unto their denis deep  
 Crouchand for cauld in covis tharme to keep.<sup>1</sup>

The actuality of this points forward to the Scottish winter of the Douglas *Prologues*.

Henryson's command of the 'popular' element in the language is certainly not more remarkable than Dunbar's. The difference may be suggested, rather negatively, by saying that while the 'popular' element is at least as much present in Dunbar's work as in Henryson's, *more* other elements are present in Dunbar's. This leaves Henryson's work as a whole the more 'popular' in character. But I seem in addition to detect a difference in how and why each uses this 'popular' element in the language. Henryson (I think of the *Fables*) uses this element quite naturally because of his partial identity in his work with the peasant people from whose speech it derives. His use of it is to that

<sup>1</sup> Cf. in the same poem, *Fables*, stanza 262.

extent less 'literary' than Dunbar's, whose highly conscious feeling for its raciness and vigour leads him deliberately, if delightedly, to see what he can do with it for comic and other purposes of his own. .

The difference is reflected in the quality of their humour. Dunbar's humour is of many varieties, so that it is unsafe to generalise, but it is relatively seldom quite simply 'folk' humour. Henryson's humour throughout the *Fables* (to the actual consideration of which I return) is quite simply 'folk' humour. A fox<sup>1</sup> stretches himself out on the roadway, 'the white turnit up of his ene', 'his toungh out hung'. A cadgar 'comes carpand with capill and with creillis' and finds him to all appearances dead.

He lap about full lightly where he lay,  
And all the trace he trippit on his tais;  
As he had heard ane piper play, he gais.

'Here lyis', quod he, 'the devil deid in a dyke.  
Sic ane selcouth saw I not this seven year;  
I trow ye have been tussillit with some tyke,  
That garris you lie sa still withouten steir:  
Sir fox, in faith, ye are dear welcome here;  
It is some wifis malison, I trow,  
For poultry pyking, that lightit has on you.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadgar.*

‘There sall na pedder, for purse, nor yet for glovis,  
 Nor yet for pointis pyke your pellit fra me;  
 I sall of it mak mittenis to my loofis,  
 Till hald my handis hait, wherever I be.  
 Till Flanderis sall it never sail the sea.’  
 With that in hy, he hint him by the heelis,  
 And with ane swak he swang him on the creelis.

The comic zest of that, the animal high spirits, is inherent in the language. The language shares the delighted physical energy of those whose speech it originally was—‘he trippit on his tais; as he had heard ane piper play’—‘with ane swak he swang him’. The farcical end of the *Fox and the Wolf* shows the humour again correspondingly broad. The fox has taken a kid, and because it is Lent<sup>1</sup>—

He dowkit him, and till him can he sayne:  
 ‘Ga doun, Schir Kid, cum up Schir Salmond agane!’  
 Quhill he wes deid; syne to the land him drewch,  
 And off that new maid Salmond eit anewch.

When he has eaten his fill he lies on his back

Straikand his wame aganis the sonis heit,  
 and himself remarks

‘Upon this wame set wer ane bolt full meit.’

Thus, when the keeper’s arrow unexpectedly pins

<sup>1</sup> In *The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadgar* the fox also explains, it being Lent, ‘I can nocht fische, ffor weiting of my feitt’.

him to the earth, it is something other than simply poetic justice which is satisfied.<sup>1</sup>

Henryson has been commended for his 'humanity'. If the meaning is that it is the human which Henryson sees in the animal it is a just criticism. It is not the otherness of the animals which attracts his attention: it is their human resemblances. It does not occur to the mediaeval poet to see their life as not one with ours.<sup>2</sup>

The swet sesoun provokit us to dance.<sup>3</sup>

They are animated by the same instincts as humans. The uplandis mous and the burges mous know each other's voices 'as kinnismen will do, by verray kind'; and when they meet

... grit kyndnes wes schawin thame betwene  
For quhyles thay leuch, and quhylis for joy thay gret  
Quhyles kissit sweit, quhylis in armis plet.

<sup>1</sup> Henryson's moral preoccupation does not so much as might be expected interfere with his humorous observation. In the *Two Mice*, for example, it provides little more than shrewd marginal comment: though sometimes it introduces a certain asperity which sounds personal :

He fand ane Jolie Jasp, richt precious,  
Wes castin furth in sweping of the hous.  
As Damisellis Wantoun and Insolent,  
That fane wald play, and on the streit be sene,  
To swooping of the hous thay tak na tent,  
Thay cair na thing, swa that the flure be clene.

*The Cok and the Jasp.*

<sup>2</sup> There is reproduced in Mr. Harvey Wood's edition before me a picture of the moralising cock from an early edition of the *Fables*. It looks unmistakably human. The artist need not have been endeavouring to interpret Henryson. He probably still shared in the sixteenth century something of that perception of the mediaeval poet.

<sup>3</sup> *The Lion and the Mouse.*

The two mice are surrounded with much domestic detail which is an additional aid to their identification with common humanity. But in the *Two Mice* and in the opening of the *Paddock and the Mous* there is at the same time a delicate appreciation of the littleness of these creatures as such.

Ane lytill Mous come till ane Revir syde;  
 Scho nicht not waid, hir schankis were sa schort,  
 Scho culd not swym, scho had na hors to ryde:  
 Of verray force behovit hir to byde,  
 And to and ffra besyde that Revir deip  
 Scho ran, cryand with mony pietuous peip.

‘Help over, help over’, this silie Mous can cry,  
 ‘For Goddis lufe, sum bodie over the brym’.  
 (With that ane Paddock, in the water by,

Put up hir heid . . .)<sup>1</sup>

‘Seis thow’, quod scho, ‘off corne yone Jolie flat,  
 Off ryip Aitis, off Barlie, Peis and Quheit?  
 I am hungrie, and fane wald be thair at,  
 But I am stoppit be this watter greit.’

The ‘schort schankis’ and the ‘pietuous peip’ of the distressed creature suggest the mouse characteristics. ‘Scho had na hors to ryde’ indicates that she is at the same time human as are her kindred ‘in armis plet’ in the previous passage. (Burns was not the first to have this kind of feeling for mice, though his poem, coming when it did, has

<sup>1</sup> Brackets mine.

perhaps provided the handiest excuse for the sentimentalisation of it.) She sees 'the Jolie flat'. But the river provides a gigantic obstacle:

But I am stoppit be this watter greit.

The 'seliness' and 'bruukkilness' of these creatures are at the same time the 'seliness' and 'bruukkilness' of humanity. The birds and beasts of the *Fables* retain just sufficient of the bird and beast characteristics to enliven them in their roles in the human tragi-comedy.

Not all of the *Fables* re-do Aesop; some of them (as I have already noted) belong to the Reynard cycle; there is no other version extant of *The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadgar*. But they belong as a whole to the great 'popular' tradition of mediaeval Europe. There are places in them (as in the *Prologue to the Lion and the Mouse*) where Henryson is more 'literary' than 'popular'. But in general where, for example, he comes near to Chaucer it is to the 'popular' Chaucer. Some of the beast conversation in the *Trial of the Fox* is obviously from the same source of *fabliau* tradition, as the debate between the birds in the *Parlement of Foules*. The wolf's head is bloody from the mare's kick. The fox answers the Lion King and Judge's question:

‘My Lord, speir not at me!  
Speir at your Doctour off Divinitie,  
With his reid cap can tell you weill aneuch,’  
With that the Lyoun, and all the laif thay leuch.

And so to the sudden change of tone in

Swa come the yow, the Mother of the Lam

—the lamb murdered by the fox. But though there is in the poem (stanza 125) a touch of heraldic imagery there is nothing of the splendour that Chaucer brought from Italian poetry into the *Parlement of Foules* (230-280).

The comparison between the *Cock and the Fox* and Chaucer’s version of the same (the *Nonne Preestes Tale*) brings out Henryson’s limitations. The conversation between the cock and the fox (*Fables*, stanzas 64-67) and between the cock’s three wives Pertok, Sprutok, and Toppok (71-77) are excellent comedy. But the humour is not equal to the sophisticated humour of Chaucer. Henryson does not compass, as Chaucer does, the fulness of burlesque and mock heroic; nor is there the equivalent of Chaucer’s appreciation of the comic absurdity of an erudite cock. There are not the varieties of comedy in the *Cock and the Fox* there are in the *Nonne Preestes Tale*. But of course there are many elements, mostly ‘popular’ elements

(‘How! berk, Berrie, Bawsie Broun’), in common.

The *Testament of Cresseid* is perhaps less ‘popular’ than the *Fables*. But neither is it in the same category as Chaucer’s *Troilus and Cresseid*. The *Troilus* has been called a novel. There are many elements in it, it is true, which have been present in the novel and absent for long from verse. What therefore particularly interests a modern in the *Troilus* is that here verse is doing not merely as much as the prose of any novel, but considerably more. The conversational intimacy the verse has acquired from French and Italian verse establishes an understanding between poet and reader. They share between them a superior wisdom. The sophistication of the verse, because it implies a sophisticated attitude on the part of poet and reader, itself implies a criticism of the love extravagance. From this technical consideration everything else follows. The Pandarus and the *Troilus* elements in the poem form, by their co-presence there, an implicit criticism the one of the other. The poem probably shocked its first readers, as every really new poem does: Chaucer seems somewhat concerned about this.

Nothing of Henryson’s exhibits this profound sophistication. His work is that of a serious good man. Nevertheless, though much lesser than the

*Troilus, the Testament* is in its own different way a startling emanation of the mediaeval mind. It has been suggested that it is impossible to over-estimate the debt of Henryson to Chaucer. The *Testament* itself suggests that it is possible. Chaucer and Henryson wrote in general in traditions which were common to both; it is therefore not always easy to estimate the indebtedness of the latter to the former. But the *Testament*, besides being unmistakably original, which does not disprove its indebtedness, contains unexpected things if one attempts to read it in relation to Chaucer.

The grave, wise attitude represented by the opening passage is that of the whole poem. The tone is a quiet elderly tone. The poet begins by carefully finding his bearings, the season of the year, the positions of the heavenly bodies, Venus in opposition to 'Phoebus, direct descending doun'.

Shouris of hail can fra the north descend,  
That scantly fra the cauld I micht defend.

There is again the actuality in the appreciation of the 'cauld'.

The northern wind had purifyit the air,  
And shed the misty cloudis fra the sky;  
The frost freezit, the blastis bitterly  
Fra Pole Arctic come whistling loud and schill  
And causit me remove aganis my will.

The wind that has 'purifyit' the air is 'fra Pole Arctic'. But what follows makes it plain that it is more than the cold of winter the poet seeks shelter from. He has 'traisted' that Venus his 'fadit heart of lufe she wald mak green'.

But for great cauld as then I lattit was,  
 And in my chalmer to the fire can pass.  
 Though lufe be hait, yet in ane man of age  
 It kindillis nocht sa soon as in youtheid,  
 Of whom the blood is flowing in ane rage,  
 And in the auld the courage doif and deid,  
 Of whilk the fire outward is best remeid:  
 To help by physic, whare that nature failit,  
 I am expert—for baith I have assailit,  
 I mend the fire, and beikit me about,  
 Then took ane drink my spreitis to comfort,  
 And armit me weill fra the cauld thereout;  
 To cut the winter nicht and mak it short  
 I took ane quair, and left all other sport.

The 'fire outward' implies the fire inward which is not there. The change from the outer cold to the inner cold—'in ane man of age' love 'kindillis nocht'—and again the change from the lack of the fire in the blood to the 'fire outward' is what enlarges the significance of the whole passage.

The poem does what it does at a considerable pressure. There is not that easy tone of amused

observation and at the same time understanding sympathy there is in the *Troilus*. The *Testament* is much more narrowly concentrated than Chaucer's in more than one sense large poem. The moral horror at the 'uncleanness' of the 'fleshly lusts' that have 'changed in filth' Cresseid's 'feminitie' merges into the purely physical horror of the 'uncleanness' of the leprosy that devours her beauty and youth. When the 'Court and Convocation' that inflicts the poetic justice has

Vanishit away; then raise she up and took  
Ane poleist glass, and her shadow culd look;  
And when she saw her face sa deformait,  
Gif she in heart was woe aneuch, God wait.

The relentlessness of that is representative. The effect there and in other places is due to a certain bareness of statement. The statements are often felt to be understatements. When her 'auld' father 'lookit on her ugly leper face' there is 'care aneuch betwix them twain'.—Again that 'aneuch'. He 'deliverit her in at the spittail house'. 'Deliverit' suggests a thing no longer of human worth; the spital house is 'at the tounis end'. 'It points forward to the perfuctoriness of 'syne buryit her withouten tarrying' and the poignant laconic brevity of the epitaph on the marble tomb.

Lo fair Ladyis, Cresseid, of Troyis Toun,  
 Sumtyme countit the flour of Womanheid,  
 Under this stane, lait Lipper, lyis deid.

The poem works by concentration, compression. The pity is concentrated in the final meeting between Troilus and Cresseid in which though 'not ane another knew'

... with ane blenk it came into hir thocht  
 That he, sometime, her face before had sene.

But in two passages Henryson does allow himself a certain 'literary' expansiveness. As a consequence they stand out from the rest of the poem as to some extent extraneous. And this must at once be admitted as a fault however justifiably they may claim, as they do, admiration for themselves. The first of these passages is the phantasmagoric pageant of the Ancient Gods; the second the complaint of Cresseid. The Ancient Gods descend out of their planets when Cupid rings the silver bell.

Whilk men micht hear fra heaven unto hell.

A close comparison between the passage and Chaucer's description of the Temple of Mars in the *Knightes Tale* (1117-1192) and of Saturn (1598-1611) only emphasises the difference between the two. The *Knightes Tale* passages (especially 1137-

1145) are a poignant series of sharp realisations of the tragedy and horror in the world; which incidentally suggests that the account of Chaucer in general acceptance requires to be considerably stretched. The *Testament* passage exhibits quite another kind of strength. The following is Henryson's Saturn.<sup>1</sup>

His face frosnit, his lire was like the leid;  
 His teeth chatterit, and cheverit with the chin;  
 His ene drowpit, how sunken in his heid;  
 Out of his nose the mildrop fast can rin;  
 The ice-schoklis that fra his hair down hang  
 Was wonder great, and as ane spear as lang.  
 Atour his belt his lyart lockis lay  
 Felterit, unfair, ourfret with frostis hoar,  
 His garmont and gyis full gay of gray,  
 His witherit weed fra him the wind outwore;  
 Ane busteous bow within his hand he bore,  
 Under his girdle ane flasche of felloun flanis,  
 Featherit with ice, and heidit with hailstanis.

The alliterative element, present so strongly in the Henryson and scarcely at all in the Chaucer, helps to give that its thew and sinew. But, perhaps because of that particular kind of robustious toughness, it is without the poignancy of the

<sup>1</sup> Apart from the Saturn and the Mars, the Venus and the Mercury are perhaps the most interesting. The figure of the physician (here Mercury) seems to have had some important significance for the late mediaeval imagination. It recurs.

Chaucer, and is more of a 'literary' *tour de force*. Whereas Henryson pictures the God Mars 'like to ane boar whetting his tuskis keen', Chaucer sees 'the sowe freten the child right in the cradel'. The passage is an example in Scots of a mode that persists into Sackville's *Induction*.

The Complaint of Cresseid is a completely mediaeval 'complaint' on the mutability theme. 'Fairness' is 'bot ane fading flour' and 'all wealth in eird away as wind it weiris'. The much celebrated garden itself

Whare thou was wont full merrily in May  
To walk and tak the dew be it was day,  
To hear the merle and mavis mony ane,  
With ladi s fair in carolling to gane,

is subject to the law of transitoriness:

All is decayit, thy weird is welterit so.

In the midst of this what might be described as the literalness, though it is at the same time not the less metaphorical, of

And for thy bed tak now ane bunch of stro,  
together with the 'mowlit bread' and the 'cider sour', brings us up sharp against the actuality of Cresseid's present condition. That the 'complaint' is in some measure felt to be itself vanity becomes explicit not only in the words but in the

movement of the rebuke of the leper woman who recalls Cresseid to herself.

And said, 'Why spurnis thou against the wall,  
To slay thyself, and mend nothing at all'.

There is nothing for it but the acceptance of fate however hard:

  Ga leir to clap thy clapper to and fro,  
  And leir after the law of leper leid.

The reiterated 'clap thy clapper to and fro' introduces again the relentlessness already referred to.

If the *Testament* is less 'popular' than the *Fables*, the *Orpheus and Eurydice* is less 'popular' still. Yet on inspection of the descent of Orpheus in the last-named poem (the rest of the poem is by comparison dull and need not detain us) it becomes plain that if it is less 'popular' than the *Fables*, it is not through any omission of the 'popular' but its absorption into something less simple. The descent of Orpheus already foreshadows Douglas's *Aeneid* as something possible to Middle Scots poetry. It is certain from his reference to it that Douglas had read Henryson's poem, but, of course, he need not have; the descent of Aneas was in any case well within his resources as a Middle Scots poet.

The Henryson begins by telling how Orpheus took his way

To seek his wife attour the grovis gray,  
Hungry and cauld, with mony wilsum wane,  
Withouten guide, he and his harp alane.

There is the sureness and certainty of the master, the strict economy, the exact proportioning of means to ends. The 'popular' element is represented in the poem by those 'wonders' and 'marvels' which Orpheus is confronted with on his adventurous journey. (We remember the popularity in the Middle Ages of fantastic stories of travel.)<sup>1</sup>

Then come he till a river wonder deep  
Oure it a brig, and on it sisters three.

Orpheus 'playit a joly spring' and the three sisters, Alecto, Megera, and Tisiphone, were subdued. That 'playit a joly spring' again represents the presence of the 'popular' which is here also the 'Scots' element. The incident of Tantalus will illustrate it more fully.

.. Syne come he til a wonder grisly hood  
Drubly and deep, that rathly down can rin,  
Where Tantalus nakit full thirsty stood,  
And yet the water yede above his chin;

---

<sup>1</sup> Is it an accident that the line  
Far, and full far, and farther than I can tell  
might be a line from the Ballads?

Though he gapit, thare wald no drop come in;  
 When he duckit the water wald descend;  
 Thus gat he nocht his thirst to slake nor mend.

Before his face ane apple hang also  
 Fast at his mouth upon a tolter thread;  
 When he gapit, it rockit to and fro,  
 And fled, as it refusit him to feed.

Then Orpheus had ruth of his great need,  
 Took out his harp and fast on it can clink  
 The water stood, and Tantalus gat drink.

The rhyme on 'clink . . . drink' (while at the same time emphasising the finality that is characteristic of the whole descent passage) marks the continued presence of the 'playit a joly spring' element. The passage is 'Scots' of course in so far as the language ('gapit', 'duckit', 'rockit') is 'Scots'. The topography of Hell is correspondingly related to that of Scotland:

Syne our a muir, wih thornis thick and sharp.

By these means Henryson realises the Classical theme anew as a Scots poet; and not without humour, for when Orpheus remarks that Eurydice is pale, Pluto answers

She faris as weill daily as does myself,  
 and adds wisely

Were she at hame in her countree of Thrace

she would soon be her former self again. But this element does not subtract from the dignity and impressiveness of the whole. The enumeration of the past great ones of the Earth whom Orpheus sees in Hell is not Dante, of course, but is at its level as mediaeval. ‘There fand he mony careful king and queen’ and ‘mony paip and cardinal’. At last, after the kings and popes, he sees Eurydice

Lean and deidlike, piteous and pale of hue  
 Richt wershe and wan, and wallowit as a weed  
 Her lily lire was like unto the leid.

The descent of Orpheus, though it thus concludes on a variation on the most solemn of late mediaeval themes, is as a whole a mediaeval variation (as the *Testament* is also) on a Classical theme; and not only mediaeval but Scots, and not only Scots but (at least as much as the *Testament*) European; and it is all these without being any the less one of them and without being any the less one.

There is nothing of Henryson’s with which to compare the *Kingis Quhair* on the one hand or the *Göldyn Targe* on the other. Henryson has no set allegory to correspond with these; which does not mean that there is no allegorical element in his work. This element is sufficiently important in his work, as in the work of all the Middle Scots poets, to

justify the keeping of the *Kingis Quhair* in mind when reading as an established background against which to set it. Just as the allegorical habit is more alive in some of the poems of Dunbar other than the set allegories, so the allegorical habit is sufficiently alive in Henryson's work. The *Fables* themselves are a kind of allegory, birds and beasts playing humans, although they do not belong to the *Kingis Quhair* and *Goldyn Targe* line. Perhaps partly because they do not belong to that line there is scarcely anything in the *Fables*, or anywhere else in Henryson, of that rhetoric which has been observed as beginning even in the *Kingis Quhair*, and which the allegories in that line were to develop into. He is almost as free from that as Chaucer himself; and in general he exhibits some of the advantages there may be at certain times in being out of the main stream of change.

## William Dunbar

**T**O Dunbar Chaucer has become the 'rose of rethoris all'; the phrase is sufficient to awaken doubt as to the substantiality of Dunbar's appreciation of Chaucer. An examination of his poetry reveals that as a poet he is in fact as different from Chaucer as it was possible for another mediaeval poet to be. Plainly, to begin an account of Dunbar from a comparison between his work and that of Chaucer would not be much to the point, unless to bring home the inaccuracy of styling Dunbar a Scottish Chaucerian. He is at a still further remove from Chaucer than Henryson, and, being nearer the European centre in his time than the latter, he belongs to the very latest mediaeval phase.

But to find the explanation of Dunbar's power in the influence, already, of the Renaissance would, again, be a misrepresentation. What gives him (in spite of, and because of, his 'lateness') his extraordinary power, whereby he is perhaps the greatest Scottish poet, is his skilled command of the rich and varied resources of language open to

him, and, related to this, his command of varied metres adapted from what were by his time the rich accumulations of mediaeval French and mediaeval Latin verse, as well as, and often united together with, indigenous alliteration and assonance used as Hopkins rather than as Swinburne uses it. This variety of language and of metres has its counterpart in a variety of modes so bewildering that our first difficulty must be to determine where the centre of Dunbar's work as a whole is. It is my object in this chapter to suggest that the core of his living achievement, that part of his achievement which we read as if it were contemporary, consists, not of the ceremonial poems, *The Goldyn Targe*, *The Thrissil and the Rois*, but of the comic and satiric poems, *The Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*, *The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Sinnis*, the goliardic blasphemies, *The Flyting*, *The Satire on Edinburgh*, and the more acrid and radical satires that merge into the saturnine poems that give his work as a whole its dark cast.

These comic and satiric poems are not less traditional than the ceremonial poems. The difference is in the nature of their several traditions, or, to put it otherwise, in the ways in which they are traditional; and this again works down to a difference in their language, the social and moral im-

plications of which should appear. The language of the comic and satiric poems is essentially the language of what was living speech in Dunbar's 'locality', which was not without its place in the still homogeneous mediaeval European community; whereas the 'aureate diction' of the ceremonial poems of Dunbar, the court poet, is at a distinct remove from living speech, and therefore from life, including Dunbar's own, in any locality; is in fact purely 'literary' or 'poetical', rootless, without actuality. The difference between the former and the latter is in consequence that between a greater and a much lesser degree of inherent life. Without life informing it, language, however brilliant its surface, and however aristocratic its lineage, is mere idle verbiage.

Yet *The Goldyn Targe* and *The Thrissil and the Rois*, though they may be pressed to one side, for the lively reader, by the vitality of the comic and satiric poems, are what in Dunbar's case had become of the direct line of European allegorical poetry descending from the *Roman de la Rose*, and on this ground they demand some attention in any attempt to give an account of Dunbar's work as a whole; this attention I prefer to give them at the beginning rather than the end of this chapter. To Dunbar himself and to his contemporaries they

doubtless seemed the centre of his work, as indeed they might be if the value of a poem is in proportion to the amount of conscious effort that seems to have been expended on it. But even to Dunbar's first readers I doubt if they were the poems which really yielded the most enjoyment.

The terms of Dunbar's celebration of Chaucer and Gower at the end of *The Goldyn Targe* are inappropriate in everything else except that they fit their context. It is Dunbar himself in *The Goldyn Targe*, not Chaucer, whose 'termis' are 'enamelit' and 'celicall' and whose 'lippis', 'tonguis', 'mouthis' are 'sugarit', 'aureate', 'mel-lifluate'. He goes wrong here as a critic, at the same time unconsciously revealing why here he goes wrong also as a poet. The first five stanzas of the poem are a similarly dazzling exercise in the rhetoric, the heavy ornamentation, the overloaded decorativeness, then, in that 'late' century, fashionable. But the poem is inadequate as a poem not because it is rhetoric, but because of the nature of that rhetoric itself. Rhetoric must be something more fundamental, more deeply rooted, than this, to be at the same time fully satisfactory as poetry. Dunbar's highly conscious interest in language carried with it certain obvious dangers. There is here a kind of rootless, mechanical delight

generated in the mere verbal exercise, but it is not healthy; it is not the same thing as the life, the abundant energy of the living language which Dunbar elsewhere successfully shares. *The Goldyn Targe* remains a monument to the fact that you cannot make a poem out of an interest purely in language, and the manipulation and arrangement of it; and when the interest is in 'poetic' language artificially enriched by over-lavish borrowing from alien sources, the resulting kind of richness may easily be fatal to life. Where this kind of rhetoric wears off, as in the beautiful passage about a hundred ladies who land in a meadow from a ship, it is significant that the poetry is revealed as something much more like Spenser than even the Chaucer of the translation of the *Roman de la Rose*. Mediaeval allegory is here seen changing into something else; it is the death of allegory, its swan-song.

The ceremonial poems were of course written for ceremonial occasions; they correspond to the pageants and processions of these occasions. To this extent they correspond to something in the public life of Dunbar and the Scotland of Dunbar's time in which ritualistic pomp and show, pageants and processions, played a part such as to suggest, the times being late, that this heightening of the

outward forms, this colouring up of the outward shows, is the symptom of some inner spiritual corruption rather than simply what it may at first seem, the spontaneous expression of the natural joy of life in a rather primitive people; there is nothing spontaneous about *The Goldyn Targe*. We cannot afford to ignore this in trying to understand the meaning of Dunbar's work as a whole. Together with the conscious interest in language the ceremonial poems exhibit, it may have a bearing on the other poems of Dunbar that are so unlike the ceremonial poems.

At this point we may well have begun to ask whether Dunbar gained anything by being, in his particular place and time, a court poet. What he did gain may be exemplified most purely by the small poem *To a Ladie*. If the ceremonial poems show that he was among other things a professional court poet, the lyric *To a Ladie* shows him capable also of a genuine courtliness. It would seem absurd to claim uniqueness for this trifle, except in the obvious sense that every poem is unique; but in Dunbar's work it is something of a rarity, something of a surprise in itself; it is at one end of his range; in it the main European tradition is alive, not as in the ceremonial poems dead. Nor is it simply a concentration of what

Dunbar does diffusely in the ceremonial poems; it contains something that is not there present; there is in it a certain unexpectedness, almost wit.

Sweet rose of virtue and of gentleness  
Delightsome lily of every lustiness.

You would expect 'lily' where you get 'rose', and 'rose' where you get 'lily'; they are interchanged: the lady is virtuous and desirable at the same time. The poem shows Dunbar's skill as a metrist; but that skill is, here, not merely metrical; it is part of the unexpectedness; it contributes, for example, to the surprise of the final line of the first and, again, the second stanza. Allegory and wit are thus brought together, the *Roman de la Rose* and, except that the poem remains in itself completely mediaeval, the conceitedness of the sixteenth century Petrarchian sonnets. This intellectual element in it, balancing the emotional, is exactly what the purely 'local' love songs of Burns are without.

But, as has been indicated, *To a Ladie* is not representative of Dunbar's characteristic achievement. It is in the comic and satiric poems that his energy, which is Dunbar, finds in various shapes and forms its free and full expression; and it is (I think) in *The Twa Mariit Wemen and the*

*Wedo* that the comic zest, the sheer enjoyment and appetite, reaches its maximum of bursting exuberance; for this poem, though in the tradition of the *chanson à mal mariée* (This is how these women, when they get together in secret, tear their husbands limb from limb), is primarily comic, not satiric; in it we devour the ripe grapes. The force of vulgar gossip is raised to the degree of art; ribaldry assumes this proportion. I choose a passage almost at random.

I wald me preen pleasandly in precious weedis,  
That luvaris might upon me look, and ying lusty  
gallandis;  
That I held in more dainty and dearer be full meikle  
Na him that dressit me so dink; full dotit was his  
heid.

When he was heryit out of hand, to hie up my  
honoris,  
And painted me as a pacock, proudest of fedderis,  
I him mis-kennit, by Christ, and cuckold him  
made.

What the poem seems essentially to represent is the force of the impudent ('lowd thai lewch') natural self rising up from among the people and asserting its right according to the 'law of luf, of nature and of kynd' without respect for moral authority, the dogmas and restraints of the Church.

Ladyis, ~~and~~ is the legend of my life, though Latin  
it be nane.

But the profane figure of the widow in church is  
an object of purely comic contemplation, a symbol;  
there is no hint of arbitrary condemnation.

Than lay I forth my bright book on breid on my  
knee

With mony lusty letter, illumynit with gold;  
And drawis my cloak forward owr my face white  
That I may spy, unespyit, a space me beside . . .  
When friendis of my husbandis beholdis me on far,  
I have a water sponge for woe, within my wide  
cloakis,

Then wring I it full wylily and wetis my cheekis.

(The consequence is she is provided with no  
dearth of lovers in secret.)

And all my luvaris leal, my lodging persewis,  
And fillis me wyne wantonly with welfare and  
joy;  
Some rounis, and some ralyeis; and some readis  
ballatis;  
Some ravis forth rudely with riotous speech,  
Some plainis, and some prayis; some praisis my  
beauty,  
Some kissis me; some clappis me; some kindness  
me proferis.

In spite of the dramatisation we to an appreciable  
extent share, we are made partakers of the comforts

of 'these creatures of the kyn of Adam', the stolen delight in unrestrained sin; the eavesdropper behind the hawthorn is scarcely an intruder.

Apon the Midsummer evin, mirriest of nichtis,  
I muvit furth allane, neir as midnicht wes past  
Besyd ane gudlie grein garth, full of gay flouris,  
Hegeit, of ane huge hicht, with hawthorn treis  
Quhairon ane bird, on ane bransche so birst out his  
notis . . .

I saw thre gay ladeis sit in ane grene arbeir . . .  
Thir gay Wiffis maid game amang the grene leiffis;  
Thai drank and did away dule under derne bewis;  
Thai swapit of the sweit wyne, thai swanquhit of  
hewis.

There is no essential contrast between the natural scene (described, because background, in more conventional language, but still bursting with the opulence of midsummer) and the gossips; the beauty of nature and the ugliness of vice, as some moralist has suggested. The hawthorn, the birds and the gossips are filled with the same heady wine, the same exuberance of life; they are equally on the plane simply of nature and instinct.

*The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Sinnis* comes from the same common source in the popular speech, though in another of these traditions, and exhibiting another variety of this humour. The humour here is savage, primitive, uncivilised. Its

expression is conditioned by the dance frenzy in the rhythm.

And first of all in dance was Pride,  
With bare wild back and bonnet on side,  
Like to make wastie wanis;  
And round about him, as a wheel,  
Hang all in rumpillis to the heel  
His kethat for the nanis;  
Mony proud trumpour with him trippit  
Throw skaldand fyre, ay as they skippit  
They girn'd with hideous granis.

The poem is commonly commended for a fantastic blending of the comic with the horrible, the ghastly, the macabre, but that is to misunderstand the essential nature of this savage folk-humour. There is no such dichotomy and no such sophistification in the poem. There is nothing fantastic or supernatural in it either. It shares the vigorous, earthy actuality of the popular sermons of the Middle Ages.

Syne Sweirness, at the second bidding,  
Come like a sow out of a midding,  
Full sleepy was his grunyie;  
Mony sweir bumbard belly-huddroun,  
Mony slute daw and sleepy duddroun . . .  
(Gluttony)  
Him followit mony foul drunkart,  
With can and collep, cop and quart,

In surfeit and excess;  
Full mony a waistless, wallydrag,  
With wamis unwieldable, did furth wag . . .

There is no incongruity, intentional or otherwise, in introducing the figure of the Highlandman at the end; Pride ('bonnet on side') and Ire are just as 'local'. But they are at the same time 'local' against the whole mediaeval religious (and ecclesiastical) background.

Whill priestis come in with bare shaven neckis,  
Than all the fiendis leugh, and made geckis,  
Black Belly, and Bawsy Brown.

*The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Sinnis* belongs to the grotesquerie of the late mediaeval popular imagination.

We shall by this time have observed that there is a good deal of the goliard even in those poems of Dunbar which are not, as *The Dregy of Dunbar* and *The Testament of Kennedy* are, primarily goliardic. The goliardic parodies should be read with Dunbar's own serious hymns in mind. These latter are scrupulously on the model of the Latin hymns, ritualistic, formal, stiff. The symbolism (I think of the beautiful 'Rorate celi desuper') is the extremely conventional symbolism of the Latin hymns. Latinised diction is used; and lines of

Latin are inserted. But the ecclesiastical world, the language of which was Latin, was something actual in Dunbar's own world; the lines of Latin fit, without incongruity, into even his profane poems, as they would not into the purely 'local' poems of Burns. The incongruity in the goliardic poems is not essentially between the Latin lines and the others (most goliardic poems were wholly in Latin), but in the clash between sacred associations and the profane sentiments of lustfulness, eating and drinking.

Ego pacior in pectore,  
 This night I myght nocht sleip a wink;  
 Licet eger in corpore,  
 Yit wald my mouth be wet with drink.  
 Nunc condo testamentum meum,  
 I leiff my saull for evermare  
 Per omnipotentem Deum,  
 In to my lordis wyne cellar;  
 Semper ibi ad remanendum,  
 Quhill domisday without dissever,  
 Bonum vinum ad bibendum,  
 With sueit Cuthbert that luffit me never.  
 A barell bung ay at my bosum,  
 Of warldis gud I had na mair;  
 Corpus meum ebriosum  
 I leif on to the toune of Air.

The blasphemy of the goliardic poems is the com-

plement of the dogmatic belief accepted (there is no reason not to suppose sincerely) in the serious hymns.

Dunbar's satire when it is serious is, as we should expect, predominantly ecclesiastical and, at its deepest, religious. *The Satire on Edinburgh* is not satire of this serious kind; it is again (unless I am much mistaken, for it has been found scathingly bitter) less satiric than comic.

May nane pass through your principal gaittis  
 For stink of haddockis and of skatis;  
 For cryis of carlingis and debaittis,  
 For fensum flytingis of defame;  
 Think ye nocht shame,  
 Before strangeris of all estaitis .  
 That sic dishonour hurt your name?

Your stinkand style that standis dirk  
 Haldis the licht fra your parish kirk;  
 Your forestairis makis your houses mirk,  
 Like na country but here at hame;  
 Think ye nocht shame  
 Sa lytle policy to wirk  
 In hurt and slander of your name?

At your hie Cross, where gold and silk  
 Suld be, there is but crudis and milk;  
 And at your Tron but cockle and wilk,  
 Pansches, puddingis of Jock and Jame;  
 Think ye nocht shame,

Sen as the warld sayis that ilk  
 In hurt and a slander of your name?

Plainly Dunbar is here thoroughly enjoying himself, even if the enjoyment is subordinated to a fairly serious and respectable intention. *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* is a poem of essentially the same nature. It is a comic *tour de force* of sheer language, but because the language is in this case living language, the coarse-textured vigorous language of the actual popular speech, it does not separate the poet from life but carries him towards it, its own life, wild, savage, uncivilised as its humour again is here.

Thow bringis' the Carrick clay to Edinburgh Cors  
 Upon thy botingis, hobland, hard as horne;  
 Stra wispis hingis owt quhair that the wattis are  
 worne;  
 Cum thou agane to skar us with thy strais,  
 We sall gar scale our sculis all the to scorne,  
 And stane the up the calsay quahir thou gais.

Off Edinburgh the boyis as beis owt thrawis,  
 • And cryis owt ay, 'Heir cumis our awin queir  
 Clerk!'  
 Than fleis thou lyk ane howlat chest with crawis,  
 Quhile all the bichis at thy botingis dois bark,  
 Then carlingis cryis, 'Keep curches in the merk,  
 Our gallowis gaipis: lo! quhair ane greceles gais.'

Than rynis thou doun the gait with gild of boyis,  
 And all the toun tykis hingand in thy heilis ;  
 Of laidis and lownis thair rysis sic ane noyes,  
 Quhill runsyis rynis away with cairt and quheilis,  
 And cager aviris castis bayth coillis and creillis,  
 For rerd of the and rattling of thy butis ;  
 Fische wyvis cryis, Fy ! and castis doun skillis  
 and skeillis,  
 Sum claschis the, sum cloddis the on the cutis.

Flyting passages, monstrous pilings-up of language,<sup>1</sup> are a feature of both Dunbar's comic

<sup>1</sup> Cf. from *Complaint to the King*.

Bot fowll, jow-jowrdane-hedit jevellis,  
 Cowkin-kensis, and culroun kevellis ;  
 Stuffettis, strekouris, and stafische strumellis ;  
 Wyld haschbaldis, haggarbaldis, and hummellis ;  
 Druncartis, dysouris, dyvowris, drevellis,  
 Misgydit memberis of the devellis ;  
 Mismad mandragis off mastis strynd,  
 Crawdonis, couhirtis, and theiffis of kynd ;  
 Blait-mowit bladyeanes with bledder cheikis,  
 Club-facet clucanes with clutit breikis,  
 Chuff-midding churllis, cumin off cart-fillaris,  
 Gryt glaschew-hedit gorge-millaris . . .  
 Panting ane prelottis contenance  
 Sa far above him set at tabill  
 That wont was for to muk the stabell ;  
 Ane pykthank in a prelottis clais,  
 With his wavill feit and wirrok tais,  
 With hoppir hippis and hences narrow,  
 And bausy handis to beir a barrow ;  
 With gredy mynd and glaschane gane,  
 Mell-hedit lyk ane mortar-stane.

The monstrous exaggeration develops into caricature, as again, for example, in *A General Satyre*.

Sic faringaillis on flaggis als fatt as quhaillis,  
 Facit lyk fulis with hattis that little availlis,  
 And sic fowill tailis, to sweip the calsay clene,  
 That dust upskaillis ; sic fillokis with fucksailis.

and satiric poems, and serve their various ends.

But there are many poems, many of them satiric, and together forming a considerable part of Dunbar's poetry, in which plainly the poet is not enjoying himself. To these we must finally turn to complete the meaning of Dunbar's poetry. At the root of these poems is the overpowering feeling that the times are late and evil everywhere dominant in the world.

The clerkis takis beneficis with bawlis,  
Some of Sanct Peter, and some of Sanct Paulis.  
Take he the rentis, no care has he  
Suppose the devil tak all their saulis . . .<sup>1</sup>

Sic pryd with prellatis, so few till preiche and pray;  
Sic hant of harlettis with thame bayth nicht and  
day.<sup>2</sup>

'This is the end' is the final feeling conveyed.  
Distrust infects the air.

Is na man thair that trestis ane uthir . . .<sup>3</sup>

Fra everilk mouth fair wordis proceedis  
In every hairet deception breedis . . .

Flattery wearis ane furrit gown . . .<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Of Discretion in Taking.*

<sup>2</sup> *A General Satyre.*

<sup>3</sup> *Tydingis fra the Sessioun.*

<sup>4</sup> *Into this Warld may none Assure.*

The sugurit mouthis with myndis thairfra  
 The figurit speiche with faceis twa . . .<sup>1</sup>

The disillusion is mature and deep-seated; it proceeds from an ultimate dissatisfaction with everything that was connoted by the phrase 'the world'.

. . . the warld, feignid and false,  
 With gall in hairt, and honied hals.

I have ventured to call the satire in these poems, directed as it is chiefly (though by no means wholly) against ecclesiastics, not merely ecclesiastical but religious (though negatively so) because of the consciousness in them of the loss or absence of goodness and of any assurance of spiritual reality. The nearest Dunbar comes to such an assurance seems to me perhaps to be here:

Lord sen in tyme sa soon to come  
 De terra resurrecturus sum,  
 Reward me with nane erdly cure  
 But me resave in regnum tuum;  
 Into this warld may none assure.

The question, to what extent the morbidity in these poems was temperamental, in Dunbar's case, and to what extent it was imposed on his poetry

<sup>1</sup> *Of the Warldis Instabilitie.*

by his world, need not trouble us. It is plainly something both profoundly personal and, since it is common to late mediaeval poetry, much more than personal. In the *Meditation in Wyntir* it is given unusually *personal* expression. Winter was no doubt, especially for Dunbar, wretched enough in itself, but it is explicitly from something more even than winter that he turns with such anxiety to the new season.

For fear of this all day I droop;  
No gold in kist, nor wine in cup,  
No lady's beautie, nor luvis bliss  
May lat me to remember this;  
How glad that ever I dine or sup.

Yit, when the nicht beginnis to short,  
It dois my spreit some part comfort,  
Off thocht oppressit with the shouris.  
Come, lusty simmer! with thy flouris,  
That I may live in some disport.

This morbidity in fact explains the Epicurean strain in Dunbar's poetry, the desperate grasping at vivid enjoyments and vivid delights.

Now all this tyme lat us be mirry  
And sett nocht by this warld a chirry,  
Now, quhill thair is gude wyne to sell,  
He that dois on dry breid wirry,  
I gif him to the Devill of hell.

The frequent images of dancing, music, drinking of red wine,

Sangis, ballatis, playis,

symbolise these delights, and the sprightly *ballade* measures of many of his poems represent them. But just as frequent is the sinister image of the gallows gaping, the violent images of cut-throats and cut-purses, and 'cartes' and 'dyce' associated with evil. It is here that a comparison with Villon suggests itself. (That it should suggest itself emphasises again the difference between Dunbar and Burns, who could not properly be compared with any poet outside the Scottish tradition.) The obsession with death<sup>1</sup> was inevitable to some part of Dunbar's poetry coming where it did; Dunbar inherited a world, part of which was mouldering in decay. That the sense of mortality is not more pervasive in his poetry than it is due to the force of that tremendous principle of life (represented in *The Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* and the other primarily comic poems) he could at times share with the peasant people. But where there is behind a clairvoyant recognition of the vanity of earthly things no supernatural assur-

<sup>1</sup> *Of Man's Mortalitie* is one of Dunbar's finest impersonal expressions of it.

ance of a spiritual reality, the worm of death and corruption finally devours everything that is,

Death followis life with gapand mouth  
Devouring fruit and flowering grane.

and the procession becomes Death's.

Unto the deid gois all Estatis,  
Princis, Prelatis and Potestatis,  
Baith rich and puir of all degree;  
Timor Mortis conturbat me.

He takes the knichtis into the field,  
Enarmit under helm and shield;  
Victor he is at all mêlée;  
Timor Mortis conturbat me.

That strāng unmerciful tyrand  
Takis on the moderis breist soukand  
The babe, full of benignitie;  
Timor Mortis conturbat me.

He takis the champion in the stour,  
The capitane closit in the tour,  
The lady in bour full of beautie;  
Timor Mortis conturbat me.

## Gavin Douglas's *Aeneid*

ALTHOUGH Douglas's *Aeneid* would not have existed as what it is but for Virgil's *Aeneid*, its poetic value consists in its present independent existence as a poem of a different language and tradition from the poem of which it is a translation. If we read Douglas's *Aeneid* as Douglas's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, our attention will be distracted between two poems, and our enjoyment of the one interfered with by a sense of its failing to be the other. Ezra Pound has remarked that Douglas's *Aeneid* is a better poem than Virgil's. Whether this remark was intended as criticism or as propaganda we need not stop to consider. What is important here is that Douglas's *Aeneid*, though it could not be other than unsatisfactory as a translation of Virgil's, *might* be a better poem than Virgil's.

Once the two *Aeneids* have been recognised as distinct, it might be supposed that a comparison between them would help towards a more critical enjoyment of each. But between poems of different languages there is seldom sufficient common

ground on which to establish such a comparison. Thus it is not to Virgil's *Aeneid* but to the body of mediaeval Scots poetry that Douglas's *Aeneid* is immediately and organically related. Although the one is a fairly close translation of the other, Virgil's *Aeneid* and Douglas's are about as different as any other two poems in different European languages. What we should be attempting in comparing them would be something about as wide as a comparison between the Scots and the Latin languages; the difference between the two poems being ultimately that between the Scots and Latin sensibilities. But we can begin to form a distinct particularisation of Douglas's poem out from mediaeval Scots poetry in general only by comparing it with other mediaeval Scots poems. It may then become apparent how far the poem is affected by being a translation of a Latin poem, and how far as a consequence it extends the boundaries of Scots poetry, as Chaucer had done those of English poetry, in the direction—to use a geographical symbol—of the Mediterranean.

Douglas's problem in the task he consciously set himself was primarily a problem of the selection and arrangement of words, but in that task was implied nothing less than an attempt to translate—to assimilate in Scots—a civilisation. In the

Prologue to Book I he shows that he was himself aware of the nature of his difficulties. By comparison with Virgil's metropolitan and polite Latin he perceives that Scots is rural ('rural vulgar gross') and barbarous ('lewit barbour tongue'). Here is a passage from Book V:

By then the auld Meneit owre shipboard slide,  
 Heavy, and all his weed sowpit with seis,  
 Scarce from the waterground upholtit he is,  
 Syne swimmand held on to the craggis hicht,  
 Sat on a dry rock, and himself gan dicht,  
 The Troyanis lauchis fast seand him fall,  
 And, him behaldand swim, they cacklit all;  
 Bot maist thai makin game and great riot  
 To see him spout salt water of his throat.

This (with for example its suggestion of hens in 'cacklit') has a vigour that Virgil might have envied, but it is not 'polite'. There comes out in it that savage folk humour that comes out also in other mediaeval Scots poetry. The 'rustic' quality is again, allowing that Scots had no special word for 'charioteers', unmistakable in

The carteris smat their horses fast in teyn,  
 With renyes slackit, and sweat drippand bedene.

Even if the first Prologue were not so explicit as it is, it might be assumed from Douglas's undertaking that Virgil's Latin must have made him

conscious of a centre of polite and humane civilisation in the past that might serve as a type of what Scots should seek to become. It was an attitude which was to persist throughout Europe right up to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Latin, which was to Dunbar the Latin of the mediaeval Catholic Church, was to Douglas the Latin *also* of the Roman Empire and its older civilisation.

Virgil was, of course, a sacred poet to the Middle Ages; there are signs that to Douglas, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, he had ceased to be so. But, though as a translator Douglas belongs to the humanistic scholarship of the Renaissance, as a poet he continues mediaeval. His oneness with the mediaeval poets may be felt in almost any of his lines. The description in Book IV of Dido and Aeneas passing to hunting offers a convenient comparison with Chaucer's version of the same in the *Legend of Good Women*. But the resemblances between Douglas's poem and those of Chaucer and others are not merely a matter of unconscious reminiscence or conscious borrowing. The tenderness ('pitee') of the passage about the death of Euryalus and Nisus and the lament of the mother of Euryalus in Book IX correspond, of course, to the Virgilian tenderness,

but are not quite the same; they are in the vein of the mediaeval Christian tenderness common in different degrees to Chaucer and Douglas and to all mediaeval poetry.

It would clear up many misconceptions if it could be established in what sense the original Prologues to the various books of Douglas's *Aeneid* are 'original' as compared with the 'translation' part of the poem. In some respects the 'translation' part might be regarded as more 'original' than at least some passages of the Prologues. Douglas's indebtedness—which is immediately to his Scots predecessors—is even more apparent in these passages than in the translation. There is in some of these passages a more Latinised diction than there is anywhere in the translation from Virgil's Latin, and this Latinised diction (together with a French element) is identical with the 'aureate diction' which had been formed in Scots poetry previous to Douglas.

Yet Scots poetry, even mediaeval Scots poetry, has never been less provincial than the 'translation' part of Douglas's *Aeneid*. The limitations within which Douglas worked, and which were recognised by him as limitations, were imposed not by Virgil but by the Scots language. But Middle Scots, as Douglas inherited it, and thanks

to the work of his predecessors, could be compelled, recalcitrant though Douglas still found it, to perform a task of what might be described as European significance and magnitude. Its very recalcitrance, its resistance through its power of individuality, became then in some respects a positive advantage. Douglas's Scots poem could *afford* to be more free from provinciality than even its immediate predecessors without losing its Scots identity. If it is even more free than they from provinciality we may conjecture that to be the effect the Latin poem had on it. But the difference between it and later Scots poems arises primarily from the fact that when this poem was written, Scotland was a growing branch of the growing tree that was Europe, and its language had temporarily taken its place as one of the literary languages of Europe.

No doubt Douglas brought across a modifying something from his direct experience of reading Virgil, though what that something was it would be difficult to analyse, since it was changed into something different again in the act of becoming Scots poetry. The 'originality' of the celebrated description of winter which forms the Prologue to Book VII is more easily estimable in relation to the work of Douglas's predecessors. It evidently

originates in Douglas's own direct experience of the winter cold in Scotland. Henryson had previously undertaken poetic exploration into this region of winter, as, similarly, into that of a Classical theme. We need only turn to the introductory passage of Henryson's *Fable of the Swallow and the Other Birds* to find a feeling for birds, beasts and humans overtaken by the winter, similar to that of the following passage from the Douglas Prologue:

Small birdis, flockand throw thick ronis thrang,  
In chirming and with cheeping changit their sang,  
Seekand hidlis and hirnis them to hide  
From fearful thudis of the tempestuous tide.  
The water-linnis routtis, and every iind  
Whisslit and brayit of the swouchand wind.  
Puir labourers and busy husbandmen  
Went wet and weary draglit in the fen  
The silly sheep and their little herd-groomis  
Lurkis under lea of bankis, wodis, and broomis.

And we need only turn to the opening of the *Testament of Cresseid* for an appreciation of the cold actual in much the same terms as those ('congealit', 'penetrative', 'pure', 'dazing the blood') of the following:

In this congealit season sharp and chill,  
The caller air penetrative and pure,  
Dazing the blood in every creature.

But Henryson did not carry this exploration so far and so triumphantly as Douglas:

Rivers ran reid on spate with water broun,  
 And burnis hurlis all their bankis doun . . .  
 On ragged rockis of hard harsk whin stane,  
 With frozen frontis cauld clynty clewis shane . . .  
 Ghostly shadowis of eild and grisly deid,  
 Thick drumly skuggis derknit so the heaven . . .  
 Sharp soppis of sleet, and of the snipand snaw,  
 The dowie ditches were all donk and wait,  
 The law valley flodderit all with spate,  
 The plain streetis and every hie way  
 Full of flushis, dubbis, mire and clay.  
 Laggerit leas wallowit fernis shew,  
 Broun muiris kithit their wisnit mossy hue,  
 Bank, brae, and boddum blanchit wox and bare;  
 For gurll weather growit beastis hair;  
 The wind made wave the reid weed on the dyke;  
 Bedovin in donkis deep was every syk,  
 Owre craggis, and the front of rockis seir,  
 Hang great ice-schoklis lang as ony spear;  
 The grund stude barrand, widderit, dosk and grey.

Though in its mediaeval context it gains some of its force <sup>1</sup> from being 'ane similitude of hell' haunted by 'ghostly shadowis of eild and grisly deid', the landscape, its burns in spate, its 'broun muiris' with 'wisnit mossy hue'—'The wind made wave the reid weed on the dyke'—is unmis-

<sup>1</sup> The heavy, clogged rhythm suggests a huge, impeded, dammed-up force.

takably Scottish. It was a difficult achievement for a mediaeval poet—at least if he was a Scotsman or Englishman living so far away from Italy and Provence, where mediaeval poetry had its roots—to be so *local*. But in describing winter Douglas was forced back more on his own resources, which happened to be what for this purpose were the incomparable resources of his Scots speech, than he was in his description of summer (Prologues to Books XII and XIII). He experiences summer in his poetry primarily as the Mediterranean summer—he writes of the olive and the grape—which had penetrated into Scots, as into English, poetry from the poetry of Provence and Italy. It is the quality of the diction that distinguishes Douglas's poetic summer from his winter. The 'aureate diction' of much of the summer places it at once as the fashionable rhetoric of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The difference comes out again in the nature of the alliteration and assonance, which is more consciously elaborated in the case of the summer and less indigenous and organic. The 'gemmit treis' and the 'silver scalit fishes in the streamis' belong to the older allegorical landscape. The fishes

With finnis shinand broun as synopar  
And chisel tailis steerand heir and thair,

go back in Scots to the *Kingis Quhair*, though they have lost their original symbolic significance. But even Douglas's summer has its occasional particular observation:

Up goes the bat, with hir pelit leathren flycht.

It may not have been an accident that the poet of the *Seasons* was like the poet of these Prologues, a Scotsman, but though a Scotsman Thomson was not a Scots poet. That in itself sets Thomson and Douglas so far apart as to make the comparison between them so often recommended of little help. Unlike Thomson's Miltonic English, the un-Scottish elements in the literary language Douglas inherited could not prevent him from being a Scots poet even in his summer.

It is lucky that the British Muse can claim Douglas's *Aeneid*. Surrey's blank verse fragment has greater historical importance than poetic value. Dryden's heroic couplet *Aeneid* is in the inflated heroic style, and seems to me much inferior as a poem to Douglas's. But any English *Aeneid*, even in heroic couplets (think of Pope's *Iliad*), was almost bound after Milton's epic to be in some degree Miltonic, and no Scots *Aeneid* comparable to Douglas's would have been possible later than the sixteenth century. In the exploration of a

Classical theme in Scots, Henryson had already shown the capabilities of the language, as it then was, in parts of his *Orpheus and Eurydice*. His descent of Orpheus in that poem offers a comparison with Douglas's descent of Aeneas in Book VI. Although the later descent is fairly literal translation, it has again the essentially Scots and mediaeval quality of the Orpheus descent. There is the presence of the mythological folk-imagination of the Middle Ages as distinct from that of the Classical World:

And in the middis of the outer ward  
With braid branchis spred owre all the sward  
A rank elm-tree stood, huge, great and stock ald;  
The vulgair people in that samyn hald  
Belevis there vain dreamis makis their dwelling,  
Under ilk leaf full thick they stick and hing.

The difference between that *vain* and *vana* is the difference between the two worlds. To appreciate that difference one must think of the word *vain* (Pride and Vanity) as used in the folk *Ballads*. Dryden, as belonging to the Age of Correctness, has the emptier 'empty'. The 'thick . . . stick . . . hing' of the richly physiological folk speech renders what is in the sophisticated Latin the concise precision of *adhaerent*. The shadows and the savage beasts

Amang the shadowis and the skuggis merk  
The hell houndis hard they yowl and berk

and the monstrous shapes of Dreid, Age, Hunger, Indigence and Discord, among which Aeneas adventures, belong in Douglas's poem to the mediaeval Hell. (Dante, we remember, had already taken Virgil to his Hell.) Aeneas, the poet goes on, would have rushed upon those shapes with drawn sword,

And with his bitand bricht brand, all in vain  
The toom shadowis smitten to have slain.

There is that surety and competence in handling the European theme that Henryson had already shown. But never before or since has there been any other such sustained flight in Scots as these twelve books. They indicate in what was in some ways (if we are to judge from some of the evidence) the semi-barbarous Scotland of the early sixteenth century, the existence not only of a high level of humanistic scholarship but of a higher level of culture than has existed in Scotland since.

## David Lindsay

TO explain David Lindsay's enormous popularity among the Scottish people for almost two centuries after his death—a popularity only equalled it is said by that of the Bible—it would be necessary to enter into extra-literary considerations. His verse (much of it seems to me dull) does not in itself justify such popularity. Even at its best it is inferior to Henryson and Dunbar and Gavin Douglas. The more ambitious poems are in the dead conventional of the early sixteenth century, and only locally does life assert itself in them. It seems unlikely that it was on the strength of these that Lindsay's popularity persisted after Henryson and Dunbar were forgotten.

Lindsay's poems were so popular less, it seems, because of their intrinsic merits than because politically they were on the winning popular side (and *because* of their moralisings and preachings which included lengthy advice as to how the King should govern). In Lindsay's hands the traditional satire against Churchmen turned, whether intentionally or not, political as much as moral. It

took effect at the most vulnerable point—the growing corruption of the Church—as propaganda of the social revolution which to a great extent the Reformation in Scotland was. The nature of Lindsay's satire as compared with Dunbar's (Lindsay's is more related to the possibility of political action) itself suggests the extent to which the Reformation in Scotland was taking on the aspect of an uprising of the common people against ecclesiastical, legal and other forms of a corrupt authority.<sup>1</sup>

Heir sall they cleith Johne the Common-weill  
gorgeouslie and set him doun amang them in  
Parliament

In addition to (1) the ecclesiastical satire turned political, the elements of Lindsay's work which probably appealed to the Scottish folk, were (2) the moralisings and preachings, and (3) the perfectly immoral comic, largely farcical, 'popular' element, broad and ribald. There is far more of this last, and, because in association with the 'right' moral and political attitudes of the more serious parts, it probably accounted for much

<sup>1</sup> Scotland, in fact, suffered one of the first of the series of inroads into the mediaeval caste order which have destroyed the European aristocracy as well as the Church and have set Europe under the domination and government of a landless ex-peasantry congregated in the towns and without a culture.

more of the popularity than is conventionally assumed. Of these elements there is of course no poetic value in the prosy prolix moralisings which were evidently found edifying in the post-Reformation period. There remain the satiric and comic passages. The chief task of criticism will be to separate these out from the dead mass of Lindsay's work.

Of the longer non-dramatic poems the one which is quite free from the dead conventional and which, although far too long, can still be read with fresh enjoyment is the *Complaynt*. The passages about the childhood of James V would commend themselves even to those who are not interested in poetry.

How as ane chapman bearis his pack,  
I bore thy grace upon my back,  
And sometimes stridlingis on my neck,  
Dansand with mony bend and beck,  
The first sillabie that thou did mute  
Was *Pa, da, lyn*; upon the lute  
Then playit I twenty springis, perqueer.

But Lindsay does not indulge for long in tender personal memories and the recurring note is a certain harshness of virile common sense.

Imprudently, like witless fulis,  
They took the young Prince from the Sculis,

Where he, under obedience,  
Was learnand virtue and science,  
And hastily plat in his hand  
The governance of all Scotland.

The *Complaynt* is a poem in the familiar conversational manner, but with the metrical and rhyming liveliness appropriate to the vernacular speech to which it owes its freedom and life.

Sum gart hym raiffale at the rakcat;  
Sum hurld hym to the hurly haket;  
And sum, to schaw thare courtlie corsis,  
Wald ryid to Leith, and ryn thare horssis  
And wychtie wallope owr the sandis.

The poem shows most of Lindsay's positive qualities at once, for his total actual achievement when separated out from the rest of his work is much more limited in range than at first sight appears. Though within Lindsay's more limited achievement itself there is sufficient variety, as I hope to show, to indicate that it is a living organism, there is nothing of the variety of achievement of Dunbar, just as there is not the same intensity of power at any one point. The satire in the *Complaynt*, for instance, suggests a comparison with Dunbar's because its phrases are reminiscent of Dunbar's, but on the whole, if in a sense more narrowly 'interested', Lindsay's satire

is weaker, as what tends to be reminiscent generally is. Still, if not equal to Dunbar, the *Complaynt* exhibits Lindsay's lively satiric gift and rich acrid comic sense.

The same could be said of *Syde Taillis and Kittie's Confession* among the shorter poems and for the same reason,

To rurall folke myne dyting bene directed.

In so far as Lindsay adopts the speech 'of the peasantry, as he does generously in these poems, he ceases to be 'literary' and pretentious and ceases at once to be dull. *In Contemption of Syde Taillis*—'a rurall ryme'—is less in the service of the will than any other single poem of Lindsay. Though professedly a satire on an unpractical fashion of women's dress—

Of ane small fault whilk is nocht treason,  
Though it be contrary to reason

—it is less really that than a giving rein to the coarse comic zest inseparable from the peasant speech.

Puir claggokis clad in raploch white  
Whilk has scant twa merkis for their fees  
Will have twa ellis beneath their knees,  
Kittok that clekkit was yestreen,  
The morn will counterfeit the Queen.

Ane muirland Meg that milkis the yowis  
 Claggit with clay abune the howis,  
 In barn nor byre she will nocht bide  
 Without her kirtle tail be syde.  
 Inboroughis wanton burgess wivis  
 Wha may have sidest taillis strivis  
 Weill borderit with velvet fyne . . .  
 Then when they step furth through the street  
 Thare faldingis flappis about their feet,  
 Their laithlie lining furth ward flypit  
 Whilk has the muck and midding wypit.

Of the coarseness Lindsay has felt it necessary to be explanatory:

Because the matter been so vile  
 It may nocht have an ornate style;  
 Of stink and weedis maculate  
 No man may make a rose chaplet.

The freedom from the ornate style is in itself a positive gain. As for the presence of what the modern reader may find offensive, there is enough vigorous positive enjoyment to be got from the elements co-present with this offensive element to outweigh it. *Kittie's Confession*, though equally 'popular', is more evidently traditional than *Syde Taillis*, and the best part of it might perhaps be by anyone. The opening dialogue between the Curate and Kittie ('The Curate Kittie wald have

kist') gives its goliardic character to the poem,

And mekle latyne he did mummill  
I hard na thing but hummill bummill,

but the indictment of the Church turns earnest.

*The Satyre of the Three Estaitis* invites special attention as the only considerable dramatic piece preserved in Scots. Scots poetry has perhaps a more dramatic character than English poetry as a whole has had, at any rate since the seventeenth century; it is more related to speech and action on the one hand as also to song and dance on the other. But if we look to Lindsay's play as evidence of the great dramatic poetry there might have developed in Scots parallel with the English we shall be disappointed. It will be observed that it is no interesting new local departure. It is simply a by no means promising modification, in some respects dissipation, of the *Moralities* tradition.<sup>1</sup>

*Ane pleasant Satyre of the Three Estaitis in commendation of Virtue and Vituperation of Vice* shows considerable uncertainty of purpose resulting in considerable disorganisation, but in so far as it is a 'Morality' it is again deflected to political as much as moral ends. My own experience is that it is difficult to read *through*. But again, as is the

<sup>1</sup> Eyre-Todd points out that technically it is not a 'morality' but an 'interlude'.

case with Lindsay's poetry as a whole, in the midst of so much that is dead, there are sudden passages of abundant life. These passages are again almost invariably the passages of 'popular' comedy or, more strictly, farce. Occasionally they are coarse to the point of a brutality not to be found even in Dunbar. As the considerable variety in the verse of these passages reflects, there is in them within the 'popular' limits, a considerable variety of kinds of comedy and satire most of them traditional in origin.

The recognition of this limited variety of local successes is what, after all claims for the play as a whole or even for most of its parts have been abandoned, may employ criticism. Already the prelude to the play provides goodish popular farce of the *chanson à mal mariée* tradition in the dialogue between the Cotter and his Wife, who have both gone to Cowper to see the play.

Quhair hes thou bene, fals ladrone loun?  
Doyttand and drinkand in the toun,  
Quha gaif the leif to cum fra hame?

She continues in the manner of the *Wife of Auchtermuchty*:

Swyth cairle, speid the hame speidaly,  
Incontinent, and milk the ky,  
And muk the byre or I cum hame.

There is a less simple example—involving this same type of traditional farce—in the play itself at a point where the purely human figures are brought into farcical collision with a personification belonging to the 'Morality' element. The Sowtar and the Taylor sit down to drink with Chastitie.

SOWTAR. Fill in and play cap' out,  
For I am wonder dry;  
The Devill snyp aff thair snout,  
That haits this company.

(Heir sall thay gar chestety sit doun and drink.)

Jennie, the Taylor's daughter, catches sight of them and calls out to her mother:

Hoaw, mynnie, mynnie, mynnie.

TAYLOR'S WIFE. Quhat wald thou my deir dochter  
Jennie?

Jennie my Joy, quhair is thy dadie?

JENNIE. Mary drinkand with ane lustie ladie  
Ane fair young mayden cled in quhyte.

The Sowtar's wife next enters, and together the wives put Chastitie to flight—

CHASTITIE. Marie, Chastitie is my name be Sanct  
Blais.

TAYLOR'S WIFE. I pray God nor he work on the  
vengence  
For I luifit never Chastitie all my dayes—

and 'ding tneir gudemen' who conclude the episode with the traditional complaint of the evil of being 'weddit with sic wicket wyvis'. Farce of another similar kind is provided elsewhere by a *Miles gloriosus* who after his boastings and rant is routed by a sheepshead.

I trow yone be grit gowmakmorne,  
He gaippis, he glowris; howt welloway.

A dialogue between Pauper and Diligence provides an example of the traditional 'flyting' while at the same time illustrating in the extraordinary clowning of Pauper the impudence of the popular mind asserting itself against age-old authority.

PAUPER. Quha Devill maid the ane gentill man that  
wald not cut thy lugs?

DILIGENCE. Quhat now? Me thinks the carle begins  
to crack,

Swyith carle. Away. Or be this day Ise break  
thy back.

(Heir sall the Carle clim up and sit on the Kings  
tchyre.)

Cum doun, or be Gods crown, fals loun, I sall  
slay the.

PAUPER. Now sweir be thy brunt schinis. The  
Devill ding them fra the.

Quhat say ye till thir court dastards? Be thay  
get hail clais,  
Sa sune do thay leir to sweir and trip on thair tais.

DILIGENCE. Me thocht the carle callit me knave  
evin in my face.

Be Sanct Fillane thou salbe slane, bot gif thou  
ask grace;

Loup doun or be the gude Lord thou soll los thy  
heid.

PAUPER. I sal anis drink or I ga thocht thou had  
sworne my deid.

(Heir Diligence castes away the ledder.)

DILIGENCE. Loup now gif thou list, for thou hes  
lost the ledder.

PAUPER. It is full weil thy kind to loup and licht in  
a ledder;

Thow sal be faine to fetch agane the ledder or I  
loup.

I sall sit heir into this tchyre till I have tumde the  
stoup.

(Heir sall the Carle loup aff the scaffald.)

There are a number of 'Confessions' of which the  
jolliest is, as might be expected, a Pardoner's—

I am Sir Robert Rome-raker,  
Ane perfite publicke pardoner,  
Admittitt be the Paip

—if his speech in practising his deceptions for the  
entertainment of the audience, who are not de-  
ceived, may be classified with the 'confessions' of  
mediaeval comic and satiric poetry. Though con-  
ventionalised, his 'confession' is at the same time

sufficiently localised to have a distinct earth character.

Of Collings cow heir is ane horne;  
 For eating of Makconnals corne,  
 Was slaine into Baquidder.  
 Heir is ane coird baith great and lang,  
 Quhilk hangit Johne the Armistrang,  
 Of gude hemp soft and sound;  
 Gude halie peopil I stand for'd,  
 Quha ever beis hangit with this cord,  
 Neids never to be dround.  
 The culum of Sanct Brydis kow,  
 The gruntile of Sanct Antonis sow,  
 Quhilk buir his haly bell;  
 Quha ever he be heiris this bell clinck  
 Gif me ane ducat for till drink,  
 He sall never gang to hell.

There is a considerable *fabliau* element in the play even if it does not adopt the most obvious forms. The wolf in sheepskin conception persists and considerable use is made of disguises. Such traditional 'morality' figures as Flatterie, Falset, Deceit, disguise themselves in the hoods of monks and friars.<sup>4</sup> This fits in with the additional purpose of enforcing the satire against Churchmen. The most actual satire in the play is that which arises from a sense of the sufferings and grievances of

<sup>4</sup> Cf. in the *Testament of the Papyngo* the birds as monks, friars, priests, canons.

the poor and is concentrated chiefly by John the Commonweal's 'Complaints' of the wrongs and injustices suffered by the common people at the hands of the Church and the Law. When speaking of (among those who do no 'honest' work)

Fidlers, pypers, and pardoners:  
 Thir jugglars, jesters, and idill cuitchours,  
 Thir carriers and thir quintacensours:  
 Thir babil-beirers and thir bairds,  
 Thir sweir swyngeours with Lords and Lairds.

Lindsay reminds one of a weaker Dunbar (he has not Dunbar's language at large), but when he passes to attack monks and friars—

This bene against the great fat Freiris  
 Augustenes, Carmleits and Cordeleirs  
 And all uthers that in cowls bene cled,  
 Quhilk labours nocht and bene weill fed . . .  
 Lyand in dennis lyke idill doggis  
 I them compair to weill fed hoggis

—the vituperation becomes really angry in an individual way. This angry note is taken up again, though with more humour, in Pauper's 'complaint' against the Law's obstructions.

They gave me first ane thing thay call citandum,  
 Within aucht dayis I gat bot lybellandum,  
 Within ane moneth I gat ad opponendum,  
 In half ane yeir I gat interloquendum,

And syne I gat, how call ye it? ad replicandum,  
Bot I could never ane word yit understandhim.

The lawless figures of Common Theft and Oppression possess a certain half-farcical violent life (it exists of course in their language) which together with the half-farcical violence of the hangings seem to be representative of aspects of the actual state of Scotland that had acquired a hold on the 'popular' imagination. Falsit's 'testament' when he is about to be hanged is one of the liveliest—as when he speaks of a kind of ale made by the 'brousters of Cowper toun'.

Ane curtill queine, ane laidlie lurdane,  
Of strang wesche scho will tak ane jurdane  
And settis in the gyle-fut.  
Quha drinks of that aill, man or page,  
It will gar all his harnis rage.  
That jurdane I may rew;  
It gart my heid rin hiddie giddie,  
Sirs God nor I die in ane widdie,  
Gif this taill be nocht trew.  
Speir at the Sowtar Geordie Sillie,  
Fra tym that he had fild his bellie,  
With this unhelthsum aill.

The play ends—the figures of the Fool and the King having been brought together—in a kind of rough festival of fools. The last words with their announcement that now that the play is ended

everyone is at length free 'to rin to the tavern incontinent' are a curious *finale* to a Morality. In all this (and I have of course left out of account the moralisings and preachings that form the bulk of the play) it is useless to attempt to see any unity other than as varieties of popular comedy and satire. There are resemblances to the kind of play that at one time I thought Mr. Auden might write. The difference is that a modern is cut off from these traditional roots (which I have been attempting to indicate) and I doubt if they could be consciously come by. In so far as Lindsay's popularity was not extra-literary, in so far as the folk were enjoying literature in reading his work, those passages related to the tradition of popular vernacular poetry that persists and grows into Burns are what justify it. This reduces Lindsay's pretensions greatly by comparison with Dunbar and Henryson (in Lindsay the 'literary' Scots poetry is quite dead) but leaves him, if ever he is submitted to a critical examination, a secure position as a genuine 'popular' poet of a limited order.

## Sixteenth Century Scots Poems

ALEXANDER SCOTT

THAT the ‘literary’ Scots poetry of the sixteenth century, in general moribund in the mediaeval modes, could still in one or two instances possess itself of renewed vitality is shown by the songs and lyrics of Alexander Scott. They are no longer wholly mediaeval; they correspond to Wyatt’s in the English tradition. But they are in some ways more original, less Petrarchan conventional, and more bodied and complete, less purely lover’s laments, than Wyatt’s. They indicate that the ‘literary’ Scots tradition still had it in it to continue parallel with the English and the European tradition. That it did not, but that in Drummond it converged not simply into identity with but into an external imitation of the English tradition, cannot be explained from itself.

This vigorous individual character of Alexander Scott’s songs is not more remarkable than their accomplished ease. They are ‘literary’

songs, selections of words arranged according to intricate metrical patterns and with refrains which have not a purely metrical value but (as in the distinct Scottishness of 'I find ye aye so nice') concentrate the meaning. This Scots art goes back ultimately to the *canzon de l'amour courtois* of the troubadours; the poet may be supposed to have a musical pattern in his mind which the words follow. But the words have their full value as words.

The movement is even more that of dance, but has not the abandon of folk-dance; part of the energy is used up in the intricacy of the art which thereby contributes to the maintenance of a dignified air of aristocratic self-possession. Literary poetry in the sixteenth century was essentially the product of one social class—the aristocratic—and shared the tone of that class. But in the sixteenth century the aristocracy was still not merely in proximity to but in actual connection with the peasant people, and Alexander Scott's songs which are 'literary' poetry—poetry essentially of a cultivated aristocratic circle—share, while remaining dignified and self-possessed, a certain element of the 'popular'.

Whatten ane glaikit fule am I  
To slay myself with melancholy,

Sen weill I ken I may nocht get her!  
Or what suld be the cause, and why,  
To brek my hairt, and nocht the better.

This sobering self-knowledge—in contrast to the Petrarchan hyperbolical extravagance—does it arise from the shrewdness of the popular speech and mind or from hard sixteenth century aristocratic sophistication? Sometimes it appears more the one, sometimes more the other, but in these songs the two are never wholly distinguishable.

Lo! what it is to luv,  
Learn ye, that list to pruve,  
Be me, I say, that no wayis may  
The grund of grief remuve,  
Bot still decay, both nicht and day:  
Lo! what it is to luv.

Luve is ane fervent fire,  
Kendillit without desire;  
Short plesour, lang displesour,  
Repentance is the hire;  
Ane puir tressour without mesour:  
Luve is ane fervent fire.

To luve and to be wise,  
To rege with gud advice,  
Now thus, now than, so goes the game,  
Incertain is the dice;  
There is no man, I say, that can  
Both luve and to be wise.

Flee alwayis from the snare;  
 Learn at me to be ware;  
 It is ane pain and double trane  
     Of endless woe and care;  
 For to refrain that danger plain,  
     Flee alwayis from the snare.

It is not ingenuity of thought which is there present so much as a steadyng ballast of experienced, almost sceptical, wisdom. While testifying to the strength of passion equally to a Burn's song, Alexander Scott's takes a completer view. The violence of passion is pitted against an absence of illusionment which cannot be dismissed as simply Puritanical.

### ALEXANDER BOYD

Mark Alexander Boyd's *Sonet*, though it belongs to almost a generation later, represents still an alliance between scholarly accomplishment and vigorous 'popular' qualities.

Fra bank to bank, fra wood to wood I rum,  
 Ourhailit with my feeble fantasie;  
 Like til a leaf that fallis from a tree,  
 Or til a reed ourblawin with the win.  
 Twa gods guides me: the ane of tham is blin,  
 Yea and a bairn brocht up in vanitie;

The neist a wife ingenrit of the sea,  
And lichter nor a dauphin with her fin.  
Unhappy is the man for evermair  
That tills the sand and sawis in the air;  
But twice unhappier is he, I lairn,  
That feidis in his hairt a mad desire,  
And followis on a woman throw the fire,  
Led by a blin and teachit by a bairn.

The religious wisdom of the folk mind—not simply Puritanism but something much older—has here gained the dominance and is responsible for a deeper, a religious, seriousness and passion registered in such words as ‘fantasie’ and ‘vanitie’ and in the phrases ‘lichter nor a dauphin with her fin’, ‘tills the sand’, ‘sawis the air’, ‘feidis in his hairt a mad desire’, ‘followis on a woman throw the fire’, modified by the folk imagination that turns Cupid to a ‘bairn’ and Venus to a ‘wife’. There is a harshness in this religious contempt for human frailty that contrasts with the mediaeval Catholic tenderness of feeling—gentleness as well as courtliness—of Dunbar’s *To a Ladie*, and again with the humanity of Alexander Scott’s *Lo! what it is to live*. The three poems continue the tradition—the central European tradition in Scots—by each modifying it.

## ALEXANDER HUME

It becomes even more evident that Scottish poetry just before it was abandoned by the aristocracy and the cultivated was capable of new beginnings when we examine Alexander Hume's poem *Of the Day Estivall*. A new mode of apprehension is behind its apparent simplicity. The purity of the poet's sensibility is shown, in the exactness and clarity with which forms and colours are reflected as in a mirror or still pool. To the sixteenth century humanist objects have become detachable for curious, already almost 'scientific' observation. The objects—their properties and mechanisms—are recorded with a new kind of precision.

Back from the blue paymented whun,  
And from ilk plaister wall,  
The hot reflexing of the sun  
Inflames the air and all . . .  
With gilded eyes and open wings,  
The cock his courage shaws,  
With claps of joy his breast he dings  
And twenty times he crows.  
The dow with whistling wings sa blue  
The winds can fast collect,  
His purpour pennes turns mony hue  
Against the sun direct.

This originality of apprehension registers itself in the vocabulary. In their context the latinisms are not those of the 'aureate diction'; they are not ornamental but technical. The landscape as a whole has, as proceeding from the nature of the observation, a curiously static quality.<sup>1</sup>

The ample heaven of fabric sure  
 In cleanness does surpass  
 The crystall and the silver pure  
 Or clearest poleist glass . . .  
 All trees and simples great and small  
 That balmy leaf do bear,  
 Nor they were painted on a wall  
 Na mair they move or steer.  
 Calm is the deep and purpour sea,  
 Yea, smoother nor the sand;  
 The wawis that welt'ring wont to be,  
 Are stable like the land.  
 Sa silent is the cessile air,  
 That every cry and call,  
 The hills, and dales, and forest fair  
 Again repeats them all . . .  
 The stable ships upon the sea  
 Tends up their sails to dry . . .  
 The reek throws right up in the air  
 From every tower and town . . .  
 What pleasure were to walk and see,  
 Endlang a river clear,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. in the previous passage the almost metallic quality of the Cock ('gilded eyes', 'dings').

The perfite form of every tree  
Within the deep appear.

Perhaps, because of their emphasis on 'stability' (compare 'the stable ships upon the sea'), the most significant lines in the poem are:

The wawis that welt'ring wont to be,  
Are stable like the land.

if we remember that poem after poem previously has registered the sense of Mutability and perpetual flux. It is a secular landscape deliberately, unhurriedly particularised; but the feeling which is kept distinct and to which the objective precision of the observation is subordinated is that of a consecrated and holy enjoyment, a quiet profound piety. Integrity of this kind—suggested in another aspect by Alexander Hume's Platonic attitude to poets—

Ye pride your pens men's ears to please  
With fables and fictitious lees

—seems to be both rationalist and Puritan. Observation of the Universe controlled by the Reason and directed as pious adoration towards a First Cause, familiar as it was to become in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was something new in Scots sixteenth century poetry. The older religious poetry, by comparing Hume's

poem with which we may see more clearly what was lost in the change, may fairly be represented by the lines

O my dear Heart, young Jesus sweet,  
Prepare Thy cradle in my spreit  
And I sall rock Thee in my heart  
And nevermair fra Thee depart.

Bot I sall praise Thee evermore  
With sangis sweet unto Thy gloir,  
The knees of my heart sall I bow,  
And sing that richt Balulalow.

These lines, though appearing in 1567 in the Protestant *Gude and Godly Ballads*, are essentially of the mediaeval Catholic folk in their symbolism and tenderness.

### SIR RICHARD MAITLAND

Sir Richard Maitland's verse, unless in that part of it (*Though I be Auld*,<sup>1</sup> for example) which comes nearest to the vernacular verse of the eighteenth century—thus already in the sixteenth

<sup>1</sup> Here is a stanza from *Though I be Auld*:

The fairest wench in all this toun  
Though I her had in her best gown  
Richt bravely brall'd,  
With her I micht not play the loun,  
I am sa auld.

beginning to separate out—shows rather a last mellow ripening of the past than a new promise.

His MS. collection (by which a number of the most valuable Middle Scots poems have been preserved) is sufficient to prove him to have been a man of taste. That, when blind and old, he took pains to have copies made of these poems suggests he may have felt that they were no longer valued as they had been, and that there was some danger of their loss. But the directest evidence of his having had a sense of the immediate pastness of a valuable past is that of certain of his own poems in which there is a sadness of regretfulness that reminds one they were written in the reign of Mary. Maitland's satires bear a relation to Dunbar's. But his *Satire on the Age*, for example, is without the acridness of Dunbar. The quality of this softening is apparent in the note of 'Quhair is the blythness that hes bein' on which the poem opens. Not that there can be any weakening sentimentally co-present with such strength and freedom of mind as proceeds from Maitland's character and experience and perhaps also from his considerable affinity with the 'popular' mind. In his *Satire on the Toun Ladies* this affinity comes out in his sense of the 'vanity' of costly silks and velvets; and in *Aganis the Theivis of Liddisdaill* in

a certain glee in the rhythm which suggests a partial identification of the old judge (Maitland was a judge of the Court of Session) with the thieves. That Maitland is a genuine poet the following from *Na Kyndnes at Court without Siller* may show:

To ane grit court-man I did speir,  
That I trowit my freind had bene  
Because we war of kyn sa neir;  
To him my mater I did mene;  
Bot with disdene,  
He fled as I had done him tene,  
And wald nocht byd my taill to heir.

My hand I put into my sleif,  
And furthe of it ane purs I drew,  
And said I brocht it him to geif.  
Bayth gold and siller I him schew;  
Than he did rew  
That he unkindlie me misknew;  
And hint the purs fest in his neif.

Fra tyme he gat the purs in hand  
He kyndlie 'Cosin' callit me,  
And baid me gar him understand  
My buseness all haillalie,  
And swair that he  
My trew and faythfull freind sould be  
In courte as I pleis him command.

If it is considered that this was written a genera-

tion before Donne the magnitude of the Scottish achievement may be measured. The poise, the resultant of the balance held between the movement as that of speech and at the same time as intricately metrical, is perfect. The poem is both speech and verse—a difficult achievement. This metrical maturity is but an aspect of the mature tone of the poem as a whole which arises from an ultimate maturity of mind.

#### ALEXANDER MONTGOMERIE

By comparison with the poetry of Scott, Boyd, Hume, and Maitland, that of Alexander Montgomerie exhibits considerable uncertainty and insecurity. Though constantly harking back to mediaeval modes (*O lvesome ludy*, for example, is—though a profane poem—on the model of the hymns to the Virgin) it is beginning to be in places Renaissance poetry, and, though still in Scots, it leads on to the purely English imitation work of Drummond of Hawthornden. The unsatisfactoriness seems to arise—in spite of Montgomerie's technical preoccupation and artistry—from some inner weakening and impoverishment. The conscious artistic elaboration, as elaborate as

a courtly and scholarly gentleman can work it, covers what is essentially simpler, less subtle, than the previous Scots poetry. The fact that it is possible to feel, as well as to think of, the artistry as separate from what else there is in the poem is the worst possible sign. The metrical skill itself becomes in places mere metricality; the metre seems to detach itself, as it were, from the poem and to lose relation with the mood. The jig movement which closes each stanza of the *Bankis of Helicon* and *The Cherry and the Slae* is as often as not shockingly inappropriate, as it never could be in Burns, who with sure instinct adopted it. *The Cherry and the Slae*, on which Montgomerie's considerable reputation seems to be based, far too long in any case, bogs itself in moralisings but is at the same time fundamentally not serious enough. The prettiness, the charming littleness of his Cupid may be delicious but remains essentially trivial by comparison with the mediaeval lover's saint.

Lo, how that little God of Love  
Before me there appeared!  
So mild-like and child-like,  
With bow three quarteris scant,  
So moyly and coyly,  
He lukit like ane sant.

Ane cleirly crisp hang owre his eyes,  
His quiver by his naked thighs  
    Hang in ane silver lace.  
Of gold, betwix his shoulders, grew  
Twa pretty wings wherewith he flew;  
    On his left arm ane brace.

‘What wald thou give me, friend,’ quod he,  
‘To have thae pretty wingis to flee,  
    To sport thee for a while?  
Or what, gif I suld len’ thee here  
My bow and all my shooting gear,  
    Somebody to beguile?’

. . . . .

Than furth I drew that deadly dairt  
Whilk sometime shot his mother,  
Wherewith I hurt my wanton hairt,  
    In hope to hurt ane other.

Montgomerie occasionally makes a pretty use of Renaissance Pagan Classical imagery, and his poetry is as a whole animated by a certain young delight. That is about the most that can be said. Montgomerie is at his best, it seems to me, in the song *Hey! Now the day dawis* where he is more nearly content to be freshly what he feels. But this song is much simpler than Alexander Scott’s.

CHRISTIS KIRK ON THE GREEN AND  
PEBLIS TO THE PLAY

The first notable poems in which the specific vernacular tradition that was to culminate in Fergusson and Burns may be observed in one of its particular forms are *Christis Kirk on the Green* and *Peblis to the Play*.

Hopcalyo and Cardronow  
Gadderit out thick-auld,  
With 'hey and how rolumbelow'  
The young folk were full bauld.  
The bagpipe blew, and they out-threw  
Out of the tounis untauld.

In the 'popular' verse there is no lack of joyous vitality at least, because no lack of it in the peasant people. Their fairs were their rustic Pagan festivals. About these there was nothing Puritan. The coarse, comic topsyturvydom of the fair is caught up into the wild abandon, the fling of the fast dance.

He start to his great grey mare,  
And off he tumblit the creelis.  
'Alas!' quod she, 'Hald our gudeman!'  
And on her knees she kneelis.  
'Abide,' quod she; 'Why, nay,' quod he;  
In-till his stirrupis he lap;

The girdin brak, and he flew off,  
And upstart baith his heelis,  
At anis,  
Of Peblis to the play.

His wife came out, and gaif ane shout,  
And be the fit she gat him;  
All bedirtin drew him out;  
'Lord God! rickt weil that sat him!'  
He said, 'Where is yon culroun knave?'  
Quod she, 'I rede ye, lat him  
Gang hame his gates.' 'Be God,' quod he,  
'I sall anis have at him  
Yit,  
Of Peblis to the play.'

The rhythm and the continual series of surprising accidents heaped one on top of the other suggest an unstopping dance. The language, because it is that of peasant speech sharing the vigours of the abounding peasant life, magnificently conveys the sense of strongly physical, furious fun. The popular character of *Christis Kirk on the Green* and *Peblis to the Play* is of course no evidence that they were not composed by King James V to whom they have been attributed. The king would not be so dissociated from the folk that he would not have been capable of composing poetry not only in a 'popular' mode, but genuinely 'popular'.

## The Scots Seventeenth Century

IN the sixteenth century the older Catholic Scotland began to give way to (on the surface at least) Presbyterian Scotland. The profound nature of the changes (more radical than in England) which were then initiated, the dissolution of the whole organism and the severance of its vital connections with Europe, was bound to have the severest repercussions on poetry. It was not a coincidence that the cultivation of poetry in Scots as a serious 'literary' art among the aristocracy ceased in the seventeenth century. The most immediate cause was probably the transference of the Scottish court to England; for that deprived the Scottish aristocracy, and the art of poetry, of a Scottish centre. Gradually those of the aristocracy who continued to live only on their estates tended to become mere rustic landowners, while those who followed the court to England gradually lost, and were content to lose, their Scottish speech and individuality. What little distinctively Scots poetry persisted in the seventeenth century

was already, even when cultivated by aristocrats, 'popular' in character.

Poetry as a serious 'literary' art continued in the seventeenth century to be cultivated by Scottish aristocrats such as Drummond of Hawthornden, the friend of Ben Jonson—but in English. Drummond wrote verse distinguishable from that of some of his English contemporaries only by being—as the inflexibility of the rhythm, the ornamental 'poetic' of the imagery reveal—an exceptionally accomplished and refined imitation of theirs. From Drummond's verse it is possible to see how Milton was destined to exert a fatal influence on Scotsmen writing English verse. Drummond's successor in the more bourgeois eighteenth century was Thomson.

The English Bible also, established early in the seventeenth century as the book most frequented by the Scottish people, destroyed the possibility of a Scots prose just when it had begun to develop with some vigour for vituperative controversial purposes. Hitherto the Latin of the Catholic Church, reinforced by the French influence (of the 'Auld Alliance'), had counteracted the English influence; but now, while the Catholic partisans wrote in Scots, the Protestants (being in alliance with Protestant England) began to write in

English. The extinction of Scots prose, besides being deplorable in itself, was bound to affect unfavourably the development of Scots poetry. Actually the 'popular' poetry persisted for another two hundred years, dependent only on peasant speech (and song and dance). But a solid basis of prose would have been invaluable; for poetry could no longer continue, as before, satisfactorily to perform also the work of prose. So the anomaly arose of Scotsmen writing prose in English and verse in Scots. There has never been, for example—though some of the Edinburgh reviewers of 1800 realised the need—a Scots criticism of Scots poetry; a Scots critical vocabulary had no chance to develop, nor a Scots philosophical or scientific vocabulary. The damage must have been incalculable; Scots poetry, since the mediaeval unity of it was broken up, has suffered from a lack of intellectuality—partly owing to this absence of an intellectual vocabulary such as could only have been developed in a prose discipline.

The 'explanation that it was because of the distraction of civil war that poetry was not cultivated in Scots in the seventeenth century is not in itself adequate. The history of Scotland before, and right up to, the sixteenth century is one of blood. In addition to the long feud with England.

there were as deep divisions within Scotland itself—the division between the Celtic Highlands and the Lowlands and the murderous feuds between the over-powerful barons involving incessantly the king; there was scarcely a Stuart king of Scotland who died in his bed. Yet in spite of that—because there was on the one hand a strong peasant life and on the other, in Catholicism, something European, and because there was a centre for it in the existence of a Scottish court—poetry was cultivated with greater success in the fifteenth century than in any later period.

It is more likely that the fanatical theological and political controversies of the seventeenth century ultimately stultified poetry in Scotland (though they were certainly not what stultified the Scots prose) by in some way fracturing the Scottish mind. But there is no immediate evidence of this beyond the fact, which may simply be coincidental, that the cultivation of poetry in Scots as a 'literary' art rather abruptly ceased about the same time as these controversies. As far as the poetry which continued to be composed is concerned, whether that which was composed in English or the 'popular' poetry in Scots, there might almost have been no such thing as Calvinistic Presbyterianism. Puritanism is supposed

to have been strongest among the people, yet the 'popular' poetry is in itself quite unaffected by it. Yet why poetry in Scots since the seventeenth century remained confined to a few 'popular' modes may perhaps be explained as resulting from the narrowing of interests, together with the limiting conception of poetry in Scots as 'rhyming' and 'fun', consequent upon the blow which in the seventeenth century was struck at the roots of humane culture. But the fact that poetry in Scotland had become split up into two kinds in different languages, itself indicates already a rupture, a cleavage in the essential unity of the nation, and of its mind and culture. The peasantry continued Scottish longest but was all but abandoned at the top.



## PART TWO



## Allan Ramsay's Scots Poems

ALLAN RAMSAY'S services in various ways to Scottish literature would require a long account, if justice were to be done to them all. As publisher and editor—although, as we should think, a very bad editor—he did invaluable work in re-establishing in the eighteenth century a Scottish literary tradition, and thus helping to make possible Fergusson and Burns. In purifying of their ruder elements the songs of the *Tea-Table Miscellany* for the tea-table, he introduces into them with the best intentions considerable impurity. They read mostly as conventional eighteenth century popular songs, with here and there lines and even whole stanzas of genuine folk-song persisting. There is nothing in Ramsay of the genius in this respect of Burns. But in the *Miscellany* he initiated experiments which that genius was to carry to fruition. As editor and publisher of the *Evergreen* he resurrected part of the older Scots poetry and popularised it, though at the expense of doing it some injury. Ramsay was thus at any

rate sufficiently more conscious of the literary Scottish past than others of his time to succeed in re-establishing a Scottish tradition with its aid. His bookshop seems to have become the centre of an Edinburgh cultivated circle—a place where there could be that ‘exchange of ideas’ without which a literary culture cannot become effective. Ramsay was an unusually active man of varied interests—he took a practical interest, for example, in painting and music in addition to literature—and that he possessed great courage is shown by his attempt to establish a theatre in the teeth of Presbyterian Edinburgh. I am not concerned here, however, with Ramsay’s services to Scottish literature in ways other than as himself something of a Scots poet, perhaps after all the directest way in which he is related to his two successors of genius.

Ramsay’s own achievement as a poet seems to me limited to a modicum even of his Scots poems, which themselves form only a proportion of all that he wrote in verse. His Scots pastorals (he has been chiefly famous of course as the poet of the *Gentle Shepherd*) cater for what was essentially an English taste, even if that taste existed (or was created by Ramsay himself) also in Scotland. An advantage which Ramsay’s (and Fergusson’s) pas-

torals have over Gay's is that their 'rustic dialect' assists for the townsman the atmosphere of a real 'rustic' world. Personally I have found Ramsay's *Fables*—the Scots equivalent of Gay's *Fables*—much more amusing to read than the faded *Gentle Shepherd*. 'Some of the following,' he says in his advertisement to his *Fables and Tales*, 'are taken from Messieurs la Fontaine and la Motte, whom I have endeavoured to make speak Scots with as much ease as I can. . . . A man who has his mind furnished with such a stock of good sense as may be had from these excellent Fables, which have been approved of by ages, is proof against the insults of all those mistaken notions which so much harass human life; and what is life without serenity of mind?' They are at least an attempt to re-establish contact in Scots with the literature of Europe, and though they are of course very much less significant in almost every way than the *Fables* of Henryson, they have gained something of brevity at least from the French models. Prosaic though they are they do 'furnish', as the product of Ramsay's maturer years, 'a stock of good sense' with a sufficient proportion of quiet entertainment.

Ramsay's Horatianism (he did a good deal in the way of translation and imitation of Horace),

though it is again connected with an English fashion, seems to form almost the chief part of what he found to say significantly in Scots verse. Unlike his pastoralism, I do not feel that it is merely Scotticised but that it has become in fact Scots. The following is from the third of the *Seven Familiar Epistles* that passed between him and Hamilton of Gilbertfield:

Ne'er fash about your neist year's state,  
Nor with superior pow'rs debate,  
Nor cantrapes cast to ken your fate;  
    There's ills anew  
To cram our days, which soon grow late;  
    Let's live just now.

When northern blasts the ocean snurl,  
And gars the heights and hows look gurl,  
Then left about the bumper whirl,  
    And toom the horn;  
Grip fast the hours which hasty hurl,  
    The morn's the morn.

Thus to Leuconoe sang sweet Flaccus,  
Wha nane e'er thought a gillygacus;  
And why should we let whimsies bawk us,  
    When joy's in season,  
And thole sae aft the spleen to whauk us  
    Out of our reason?

Tho' I were laird of tenscore acres,  
Nodding to jonks of hallen-shakers,

Yet crush'd wi' humdrums, which the weaker's  
 Contentment ruins,  
 I'd rather roost wi' causey-rakers,  
 And sup cauld sowens.

This kind of commentary on life seems a genuine characteristic because his verse there, and again in the following, is so satisfactory:

The cauldripe carlies clog'd wi' care,  
 Wha gathering gear gang hyt and gare,  
 If ramm'd wi' red, they rant and rair,  
 Like mirthfu' men,  
 It soothly shows them they can spare  
 A rowth to spend.

What'soger, when with wine he's bung,  
 Did e'er complain he had been dung,  
 Or of his toil, or empty spung?

Na, o'er his glass,  
 Nought but draw deeds employ his tongue  
 Or some sweet lass.

The most significant part of Ramsay's is the most thoroughly Scottish part—that is, the familiar epistles and the elegies in the mode of Robert Semple's seventeenth century *Habie Simson, the Piper of Kilbarchan*. Ramsay could be thoroughly Scots in these modes because they were distinctively Scots modes. The epistles and elegies, unlike the pastorals, allow no feeling of something

not quite assimilated. The strength of his idiom in the epistles and elegies is shown in its power to subjugate satisfactorily heroes and gods.

Sae some auld-gabber poets tell,  
 Jove's nimble son and leckie snell  
 Made the first fiddle of a shell,  
 On which Apollo  
 With meikle pleasure play'd himsel'  
 Baith jig and solo.

(*Elegy on Patie Birnie.*)

That bang'ster billy, Caesar July,  
 Wha at Pharsalia wan the tooly,  
 Had better sped had he mair hooly  
 Scamper'd thro' life,  
 And 'midst his glories sheath'd his' gooly  
 And kiss'd his wife.

(*Seven Familiar Epistles.*)

How fortunate Ramsay was in his idiom, which not merely saves him from prose but at times raises him to poetry, may be illustrated again by these stanzas from the *Elegy on Patie Birnie* (a famous fiddler):

When strangers landed, wow sae thrang,  
 Fuffin and peghing, he wad gang,  
 And crave their pardon that sae lang  
 He'd been a-coming;  
 Syne his bread-winner out he'd bang,  
 And fa' to buming. . . .

How pleasant was't to see thee diddle  
And dance sae finely to his fiddle,  
With nose forgaint a lass's middle,  
    And briskly brag,  
With cutty steps to ding their striddle,  
    And gar them fag.

That represents fairly the most valuable and vital part of what Fergusson and Burns inherited directly from Ramsay.

## Robert Fergusson

FERGUSSON, Allan Ramsay's successor, is an unmistakable poetic genius—a claim which could not be made for Ramsay, although it was the work of Ramsay as an editor and publisher, and as himself in his verse epistles and his elegies in the mode of *Habtie Simson* something of a Scots poet, that made practicable so late Fergusson's (and consequently Burns's) great poetic fulfilment. 'Fulfilment' may seem the wrong word to use of Fergusson's poetry. Fergusson died in a mad-house at the age of twenty-three, so that in one sense his poetry remains a fragmentary promise. But in another sense, together with that of Burns, it is a fulfilment of what had been preparing unobtrusively for at least two centuries.

It is necessary at first to distinguish between the various conventions that Fergusson inherited. He inherited a certain amount of conventionality of the kind that one cannot help feeling was an encumbrance to him however excellently he acquitted himself as a 'literary artist'. In his eclogues (*à mal mariée*, elegiac, etc.) he inherited

Ramsay's pastoralism, a Scotticised version (the 'aiten reed') of the English pastoralism of Gay and others; but just one translation (Horace, Ode XI, Lib. I) connects him with Ramsay's Horatianism. Where his verse is weakest, if occasionally charming, is where it is related as a Scotticised variety to the eighteenth century Spenser of English verse, as in the hybrid *Farmer's Ingle* (which in some ways anticipates the *Cottar's Saturday Night*), or, more often, the eighteenth century Milton of *Lycidas*, *L'Allegro*, and *Il Penseroso*; the latter combines easily with the pastoralism. Even *Auld Reekie*, one of Fergusson's best poems, weakens appreciably from the point where the eighteenth century pastoral Milton becomes audible. But from Ramsay and his predecessors Fergusson inherited also living Scots verse conventions (the Scots verse epistle and elegy, and the mode of his *Hallow Fair* and *Leith Races*) that had been given a new lease of life, and his most significant and best work is an extension of these Scots conventions. If the first half and more of *Auld Reekie* may be said to be the Scots equivalent of anything English, it is of the Augustan verse of Pope and Swift which incorporates their most active actual interests.

It is impossible not to think of Fergusson as the

predecessor of Burns. So much is Burns the fulfilment of Fergusson that it seems almost superfluous to attempt to distinguish them. Yet there seems good ground for the view that the fame of Burns has tended to deprive Fergusson of the attention he deserves and to obscure his peculiar merits. Fergusson of course has nothing like the wonderful comic *flow* of Burns's Kilmarnock poems, nor is that flow to be found anywhere else in Scots. The language of Dunbar, though its vocabulary is, if possible, even richer than that of Burns, forms much less an irrepressible flow on. Yet Fergusson inherited from the people and the poets of the people the same magnificent language as Burns, and he transmitted it to Burns created anew in poetry of fresh vivid life. In so far as Fergusson is different from Burns the difference is expressed by their individual use of the potentialities of the same inexhaustible language.

The best part of the poetry of Fergusson, that which is related to his most actual experience, is essentially a product of the Edinburgh of the eighteenth century. It is the product of a town community that was still distinctly rural in character and speech. Superficially this community was partially legal in aspect, and it received added

picturesqueness and dash from the presence of soldiers at the Castle and a town guard, aspects that are reflected in the images of Fergusson's poetry; but fundamentally its life was that of a small town community that was the focus of an extensive rural community.

Tir'd o' the law, and a' its phrasis,  
 The wylie writers, rich as Croesus,  
 Hurl frae the town in hackney chaises  
 For country cheer.<sup>1</sup>

The poetry is, as the life was, fundamentally rustic, Bacchanal—if we think of barley instead of grapes. The barber of the satiric *Braid Claith* may here be selected as a representative figure of the rich comic observation of the men and manners of this community, which is a central characteristic of Fergusson's best poetry—

On Sabbath-days the barber spark,  
 Whan he has done wi' scrapin wark,  
 Wi' siller broachie in his sark,  
 , Gangs trigly, faith!  
 Or to the Meadow, or the Park,  
 In gude Braid Claith.

Weel might ye trow, to see them there,  
 That they to shave your haffits bare,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Rising of the Session.*

Or curl an' sleek a pickle hair,  
 Wou'd be right laith,  
 Whan pacing wi' a gawsy air  
 In gude Braid Claith.

and through which it reaches to sure knowledge  
 of the human heart—

Braid Claith lends fouk an unco heese,  
 Makes mony kail-worms butter-flies,  
 Gies mony a doctor his degrees  
 For little skaith:  
 In short, you may be what you please  
 Wi' gude Braid Claith.

For thof ye had as wise a snout on  
 As Shakespeare or Sir Isaac Newton,  
 Your judgement fouk wou'd hae a doubt on,  
 I'll tak my aith,  
 Till they cou'd see ye wi' a suit on  
 O' gude Braid Claith.

It may be noted as significant that this poetry  
 registers explicitly in more than one place vigorous  
 local *resistance* to Italian and French influences.

Fiddlers, your pins in temper fix ..  
 And roset weel your fiddle-sticks,  
 But banish vile Italian tricks  
 From out your quorum;  
 Nor *fortes* wi' *pianos* mix,  
 Gie's *Tulloch Gorum*.

It is a changed attitude. The poetry is evidently

the product of a community which—vigorous though it is—feels itself in some degree *threatened* from outside. No longer feeling that it belongs to a great European community, from which it obtains nourishment, it withdraws into itself from influences which it instinctively feels to be hostile to its still vigorous identity. It was fortunate in having such resources to fall back on behind its local defences. A number of phrases from *Caller Water* will show that the poetry is still vigorous enough to incorporate into its 'local' life allusions to the ancient mythologies and poetry.

Whan father Adie first pat spade in  
 The bonny yeard of antient Eden. . . .  
 The fuddlin' Bardies now-a-days  
 Rin maukin-mad in Bacchus' praise,  
 And limp and stoiter thro' their lays  
 Anacreontic,  
 While each his sea of wine displays  
 As big's the Pontic. . . .  
 The fairest then might die a maid,  
 And Cupid quit his shooting trade. . . .

Elsewhere the idiom is still capable of mastering Euclid (*Elegy on the late Professor of Mathematics in the University of St. Andrews*),

He could, by Euclid, prove lang syne  
 A ganging point compos'd a line,

and it even digests some law Latin.' That the eighteenth century rationalistic studies were among the influences creating schisms within the mind of the community itself, the following clash presented in the concreteness of a 'character' (that of John, the late porter at St. Andrews University) may perhaps suggest:

'I hae nae meikle skill, quo' he,  
 'In what you ca' philosophy;  
 'It tells that baith the earth and sea  
     'Rin round about;  
 'Either the Bible tells a lie,  
     'Or you're a' out.

'It's i' the psalms o' David wr..,  
 'That this wide warld ne'er sho'd flit,  
 'But on the waters coshly sit  
     'Fu' steeve and lasting;  
 'An' was na he a head o' wit  
     'At sic contesting!'

The satiric idiom depreciates both viewpoints.

The strength and originality of Fergusson's poetic imagination may be observed at its best in a passage from *Auld Reekie*.

Whan feet in dirty guttersplash,  
 And fouk to wale their fitstaps fash;  
 At night the macaroni drunk,  
 In pools or gutters aftimes sunk;

Hegh! what a fright he now appears,  
Whan he his corpse dejected rears!  
Look at that head, and think if there  
The pomet slaister'd up his hair!  
The cheeks observe, where now cou'd shine  
The scancing glories o' carmine?  
Ah, legs! in vain the silk-worm there  
Display'd to view her eident care;  
For stink, instead of perfumes, grow,  
And clarty odours fragrant flow.

The richness of this magnificent comic poetry arises from its unusual combinations of images and sharp contrasts. The corpse upreared from the gutter—the *gutter* associations combined with the *corpse* associations (for I think that ‘corpse’ carried the associations of *dead* body)—are contrasted with ‘the pomet slaister’d up his hair’, ‘slaister’d’ however itself suggesting something messy, and with ‘the scancing glories o’ carmine’, ‘carmine’ introducing at the same time with the glories the unpleasant associations of rouge. So, through the superb juxtaposition of ‘legs . . . the silk-worm’s care’, the contrasts culminate sharply in those compressed in the last phrases—‘stink instead of perfumes’ and ‘clarty odours fragrant’. That Fergusson’s poetic imagination was essentially a comic imagination, fantastically enlarging its object, may be illustrated again from the *Election*.

The coat ben-by i' the kist-nook,  
That's been this towmonth swarmin,  
Is brought yence mair thereout to look,  
To fleg awa' the vermin:  
Menzies o' moths an' flaes are shook,  
An' i' the floor they howder,  
Till in a birn beneath the croock  
They're singit wi' a scowder  
To death that day.

That this was the direction in which Fergusson's genius lay, a comic imagination at work on what interested it in the actual life that lay to hand, may be brought out again by a comparison between the poem *On Seeing a Butterfly in the Street* (though not one of Fergusson's most characteristic poems) and the companion pieces *To the Bee* and *To the Goud-spink*. These latter are pieces in the eighteenth century pastoral meditative mode (considerably influenced by the Milton of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*) and they remain on the whole little divergent from the run of these charming conventional exercises. *On Seeing a Butterfly in the Street*, on the other hand, because of the introduction of the contrasting actual associations implied in *in the Street* has a considerable dash of Fergusson's characteristic witty life.

Daft gowk, in macaroni dress,  
Are ye come here to shew your face,

Bowden wi' pride o' simmer gloss,  
To cast a dash at Reikie's Cross;  
And glowr at mony twa-legg'd creature  
Flees braw by art, tho' worms by nature?

If the poem can be said in any respect to suggest any English poet, it is remotely Marvell rather than Milton.

## Burns

HERE are certain elementary distinctions to be stressed before a just estimate of Burns becomes possible. His Scottish verse must first of all be isolated not only from his own English verse (which is so obviously bad that it may at once be dismissed as such) but from English verse. It has no connections with English verse at any point, so that to consider it as a 'reaction' to the English eighteenth century manner or, along with Wordsworth, the beginning of the nineteenth is (and has been) to breed confusions. What it is connected with is the Scottish vernacular verse which for at least two centuries precedes it and of which it is for all practical purposes the culmination. I take *Christis Kirk on the Green* and *Peblis to the Play* as strictly the earliest examples of this tradition. The native elements which have again begun to develop independently in these pieces are present in the verse of Dunbar and Henryson. But the verse of Dunbar and Henryson is not independent in this sense. It has something in common with the rest of mediaeval verse. It is

Scottish and European. *Christis Kirk on the Green*, *Peblis to the Play*, the vernacular verse of the Sem-pills, Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns, is, on the other hand, Scottish and independent.

This latter tradition, if narrow, is correspondingly definite. *Christis Kirk*, *Peblis to the Play*, Fergusson's *Leith Races* and *Hallow Fair*, Burns's *Holy Fair* and *Hallowe'en* are in kind identical. So also are the verse epistles which start with those of Ramsay and Hamilton of Gilbertfield and end with those of Burns. *Habbie Simson*, *the Piper of Kilbarchan*, is the first of a series of which the burlesque elegies of Burns are the end. It was probably a positive advantage to Burns that he was compelled to work within these narrowly defined limits. It was a condition probably of his success. But the three years of poetic productivity at Moss-giel, which resulted in the Kilmarnock volume, were, it seems, sufficient practically to exhaust the possibilities. It is difficult to see what else was left him to do, if he was not simply to repeat himself, except turn for the remainder of his life to the songs.

Watson's Choice Collections had made *Christis Kirk*, *Peblis to the Play*, Montgomerie's *Cherry and the Slae* and other poems generally accessible to the eighteenth century; and Ramsay had 'modern-

ised' even Dunbar and Henryson for his *Evergreen*. But Burns inherited the past of Scottish vernacular verse essentially, and particularly, through the vernacular verse of Ramsay and Fergusson, his immediate predecessors. He invents nothing himself; he sums up the vernacular verse, and brings it to a climax.

The past, in a wider sense, was still vital in the life and speech with which he was in daily contact, that is, in the life and speech which were also his own. This folk speech cannot be separated from the folk life, of centuries of which it is the product. It is a speech which is itself almost poetry, in that it is close down to the life of sensation and saturated with the concrete wisdom of folk experience connected with the soil. The marvellous vitality which is characteristic of Burns's poetry belongs not merely to Burns but to the language. (See the last verse of *Epistle to Davie*.) In a sense the language, at its fullest expression, *is* Burns. To borrow a phrase Mr. Leavis has used of Shakespeare, Burns 'incarnates' the Scottish vernacular. This is his strength. The language throws up phrases of the type,

blethering, blustering, drunken blellum,  
fleechin', flethrin',  
huff'd an' cuff'd an' disrespeckit,

delvers, ditchers and sic cattle,  
vines an' wines an' drucken Bacchus,

which result from no surface manipulation of it.  
These develop into 'flyting' passages:

May gravels round his blather wrench  
An' gouts torment him, inch by inch,  
What twists his gruntle wi' a glunch . . .<sup>1</sup>

The use made of the language there must be distinguished from the more deliberate comic colloquation of vv. 20-23, *Death and Doctor Hornbook*. Generally the language bears its own more immediate fruition—phrases 'as fully flavoured as a nut or apple'.<sup>2</sup>

He draws a bonnie silken purse  
As lang's my tail, where, thro' the steeks,  
The yellow letter'd Geordie keeks.<sup>3</sup>

The only thing comparable to Burns's poetry is the flowering of Elizabethan folk speech in the Falstaff passages of Shakespeare. That speech belongs to a phase when 'the town' was still essentially part of the country; as the Edinburgh of Fergusson and Ramsay was. It is a speech as far as possible removed from the bloodless speech, and uprooted, bloodless lives, that exist in the

<sup>1</sup> *Scotch Drink*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Twa Dogs*.

<sup>2</sup> Synge, Preface to the *Playboy*.

tea-shops, dance-halls, cinemas, offices, factories, municipal 'workers' houses', bungalows, of our sprawling modern Suburbia. Burns's poetry represents what in Scotland, as in England, has been destroyed. Nothing like it is possible now, because the conditions that make a vernacular verse of any kind possible no longer exist.

Burns's failure to write anything better than inferior Pope, Gray and verse of the Thomson and Beattie and Shenstone kind when he writes English verse is therefore not without its significance. English was alien to him, no intimate part of his life as was his own speech, so that when he attempts to break the bounds of the narrow vernacular verse tradition by writing English verse (more especially in the years following the Kilmarnock volume), he invariably loses contact with the source of his own power. Writing to Thomson (the Song-Collector), he himself says:

These English songs gravel me to death. I have not the command of the language that I have of my native tongue. In fact I think my ideas are more barren in English than in Scottish.

This has been the case of other Scotsmen, even Scott. *Proud Maisie* and one or two other poems in the Scottish ballad manner are Scott's contribution to poetry. Fortunately it was still possible

for Burns to be a poet of the vernacular, and in general he knew, with profound intuitive knowledge, what he was doing. (See vv. 9-12, *Epistle to Lapraik*.)

Burns never writes bombast in the vernacular — *bravura*, but not bombast. His knowledge of (and by virtue of) the vernacular is too intimate. There is present in the vernacular a shrewdness, a traditional folk sense, which would in any case have kept him right. This profound good sense which is characteristic of Burns as a vernacular poet, and uncharacteristic of him as an English poet, is a different thing from the eighteenth century English 'good sense'. It has nothing to do with 'decorum'. But its effect is somewhat similar in that Burns is essentially (the fact has been obscured) a great comic, and satiric, poet.

The satires of David Lindsay (no doubt because directed against the abuses of Rome) had enjoyed a continued popularity among the Scottish folk surpassed only by the Bible. Two centuries of theological controversy had made of the Scottish peasant if not a theologian at least a controversialist, acutely aware of the satiric, as well as the vituperative, possibilities of the vernacular. Burns inherited a Scottish satiric tradition therefore, both through the vernacular itself and through literary

practice in the vernacular, as far back<sup>4</sup>, in fact, as mediaeval church satire. But (it must be observed) there is a more considerable element of satire in Burns's verse than there is in the vernacular verse from which (as verse) it derives. The line from *Christis Kirk* to Fergusson is characteristically comic but not satiric. Any account of Burns's satire must therefore start rather from a consideration of how he utilised the possibilities present in his medium. I shall endeavour to isolate for this purpose two of the 'forces' behind certain of Burns's satiric effects.

The phrase 'gospel kail'<sup>1</sup> exhibits in concentrated form one of these. It is essentially a combination of the same startling kind as

A bracelet of bright hair about the bone.<sup>2</sup>

Lilies that fester.<sup>3</sup>

Christ the tiger.<sup>4</sup>

The associations of 'gospel' are forced into unexpected combination with those of 'kail', the tension (resulting from their mutual opposition) being extreme. But Burns's phrase differs both in itself and in the use—or one of the uses—it is put to in its context. The result of the combination

<sup>1</sup> *The Ordination*.

<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare.

<sup>2</sup> Donne.

<sup>4</sup> Eliot.

in its case is partially destructive in that 'gospel' must be equated to 'kail'. The energy thus released is what is absorbed into the satire. Further, the associations of 'kail' are 'local' and, as such, contrast with the 'wider' associations of 'gospel'. The vernacular is as much a matter of idiom as of vocabulary, in that only part of the vocabulary is (as it had become) 'local'. Burns characteristic-ally plays this 'local' part of his vocabulary against the other part:

There, at Vienna or Versailles,  
He rives his father's auld entails;  
Or by Madrid he takes the rout,  
To thrum guitars an' fecht wi' nowt.<sup>1</sup>

The world of Vienna and Versailles, because balanced against the more immediate 'local' world of

He rives his father's auld entails,  
suffers satiric depreciation; as, more explicitly, in the preceding lines of the same passage:

Or maybe, in a frolic daft,  
To Hague or Calais taks a waft,  
To make a tour, an' tak a whirl,  
To learn *bon ton*, an' see the worl'.

It is the 'local' world, on the contrary, which

<sup>1</sup> *The Twa Dogs.*

suffers the satiric depreciation in *Holy Willie's Prayer* (the finest of Burns's satires):

An' when we chasten'd him therefor,  
 Thou kens how he bred sic a splore  
 As set the warld in a roar  
 O' laughin' at us;  
 Curse thou his basket and his store,  
 Kail and potatoes.

Burns appreciates its littleness in relation to the God whom Holy Willie (who is of it) familiarly addresses. But he does not appreciate its littleness as a citizen of Europe. On the contrary, this 'local' world, such as it is, is Burns's own world, and its solidity in comparison with any other is in general at the basis of his satire and (as I hope to indicate later) of much of his comedy too.

Another of the 'forces' behind certain of Burns's satiric effects is exaggeration. The satire takes effect at the point at which the exaggeration becomes distortion.

Or purse-proud, big wi' cent per cent  
 An' muckle wame . . .<sup>1</sup>

Broad caricature was inherent in Burns's medium, in that—being possessed of the vigour of folk speech—it admitted of this magnificent coarsening:

<sup>1</sup> *Second Epistle to Lapraik.*

Some gapin', glowerin' country laird  
 May warsle for your favour;  
 May claw his lug, and straik his beard,  
 And host up some palaver.<sup>1</sup>

Another of the lady's possible suitors is contemptuously dismissed in the equally exaggerated diminutiveness of the line:

Some mim-mou'd pouther'd priestie.

The exaggerated gestures of the preacher are themselves exaggerated—

Hear how he clears the points o' faith  
 Wi' rattlin' an' wi' thumpin'  
 Now meekly calm, now wild in wrath,  
 He's 'stampin' an' he's jumpin'<sup>2</sup>!

—to the point of it being suggested that the preacher dances a jig in the pulpit—involved in the fun of the Fair. 'But now the Lord's ain trumpet touts'.

Satire is, of course, found in Burns in varying degrees and in association with a variety of qualities. *Holy Willie's Prayer* is parody, in which the eloquence contributes to the satiric effect. The postscript to the *Epistle to William Simpson* is a flight of nonsense, a satiric fantasia. The *Holy Fair* differs from the poems from which it derives

<sup>1</sup> *Willie Chalmers.*

<sup>2</sup> *Holy Fair.*

in being satiric at all. Its effect is a complicated one—in the particular way its title suggests. It is satiric, in general, in combining the humorous associations of a fair with those of a church, but there is also other satire in it:

When by the plate we set our nose,  
Weel heaped up wi' hapence,  
A greedy glow'r Black Bonnet throws,  
An' we maun draw our tippence. . . .

and

But, faith! the birkie wants a manse. . . .

Death's account of the patients killed off by the amateurishness of Dr. Hornbook is, perhaps, less satiric than simply witty, as in the surprise at the end of the stave:

A countra laird had ta'en the batts,  
Or some curmurring in his guts,  
His only son for Hornbook sets,  
An' pays him well:  
The lad, for twa guid gimmer-pets,  
Was laird himsel'.

It is, in fact, not always easy to disentangle the satire.

I rhyme for fun.<sup>1</sup>

Satire in Burns is never very radically dissociated

<sup>1</sup> *Epistle to James Smith.*

from the Satyric. A quality of its anthropological origins adheres to both his satiric and comic poetry. It is rooted in the rustic festivals, the saturnalia which persisted among the peasantry in spite of Calvinism. Much of it suggests a Dionysiac rout and revel, an intoxication, a dance. The description perhaps applies most simply to *Hallowe'en*, in which the exhilaration is sustained to the end by a swift succession of surprises. But Burns's greatest pieces are all of essentially the same nature—*The Jolly Beggars*, his most representative and, as even the highly serious Arnold thought, his greatest performance, and *Tam o' Shanter*, a later and more studied performance. (*The Cottar's Saturday Night* is of course an obvious fake.) These, and perhaps the bulk of his finest comedy, are essentially extravaganza. The comedy tends to farce—of various kinds. The following passage from *Tam o' Shanter* (in which *tour de force* the amazing transitions from passage to passage are rather carefully stage-managed, though only possible at all, of course, by the nature of his idiom) is comic melodrama at the point of farce:

By this time he was cross the ford,  
Where in the snaw the chapman smoor'd;  
And past the birk and meikle stane,  
Where drunken Charlie brak's neck-bane;

And thro' the whins, and by the cairn,  
 Where hunters fand the murder'd bairn;  
 And near the thorn, aboon the well,  
 Where Mungo's mither hang'd hersel'.

There is an abandon suggested in Burns's verse everywhere which has a strangely invigorating effect. Calvinistic decorum is outraged:

Ye are sae grave, nae doubt ye're wise;  
 Nae ferly tho' ye do despise  
 The hairum-scairum, ram-stam boys,  
 The rattlin' squad:  
 I see you upward cast your eyes—  
 Ye ken the road.<sup>1</sup>

(‘nae doubt ye're wise’—‘Ye ken the road’—spring from an ironic habit of speech which was not merely personal). Not that Calvinism is not something to be understood and perhaps respected. But what is reasserted in Burns's poetry (in the very rhythm of it, I mean) is a human normality older than Calvinism. To fall back on terms I have already used, a catharsis takes place from which an essential sanity—and contentment—results. The rhythm of Burns's poetry is never essentially depressed, not even, I feel, in the vernacular passage at the beginning of *The Vision*, where it comes near it:

<sup>1</sup> *Epistle to James Smith.*

Had I to guid advice but harkit,  
 I might, by this, ha'e led a market,  
 Or strutted in a bank, and clarkit  
 My cash-account;  
 While here, half-mad, half-fed, half-sarkit,  
 Is a' th' amount.

But in general his world is a self-contained—and satisfying—one. I have described it as a 'local' world. But in one sense it is not comprehended by other worlds. In the phrase,

Eden's bonnie yard,<sup>1</sup>

'Eden' has been annexed by 'bonnie yard'. The meagre fragments which have come down through the vernacular verse from other verse—Phoebus, Pegasus, Parnassus—have likewise become part of it, and do not suggest an externality. The occasional stray personifications have lost contact with the older personification habit (and are not, of course, Gray and Collins). That of Fun,<sup>2</sup> at the beginning of *Holy Fair*, has ceased to be recognisable as a personification:

Wi' bonnet aff, quoth I, 'Sweet lass,  
 I think ye seem to ken me;  
 I'm sure I've seen that bonnie face,  
 But yet I canna name ye.'

---

<sup>1</sup> *Address to the De'il.*

<sup>2</sup> It derives from Fergusson's *Mirth*.

The Beast Fable survives, perhaps, into *The Twa Dogs*, the *Poor Mailie* poems, and others, but it has become another thing—part of this familiar ‘local’ world:

But ay keep mind to moop an’ mell  
Wi’ sheep o’ credit like thyself,

—which is the world of familiar ‘local’ conversation.

Death and the De'il belonged, already, to folk conversation. *The Address to the De'il* and the macabre caricature of Death in *Death and Dr. Hornbook*, and the drunken home-farer’s moonlit conversation with it, depend for their comic effect on being ‘conversation’ pieces in this ‘familiar’ idiom and vocabulary:

‘Guid-een,’ quo’ I: ‘Friend! hae ye been mawin’  
When ither folk are busy sawin’?’  
It seem’d to mak a kind o’ stan’,  
    But naething spak;  
At length says I, ‘Friend, w’are ye gaun?  
    Will ye go back?’

This ‘familiarity’ is the ‘devastating familiarity’ with which (someone has remarked) in the political satire Fox, Pitt, the Prince of Wales,

That vile doup-skelper Emperor Joseph,

and the Scottish Representatives (in the *Earnest Cry and Prayer*) are depreciated.

Burns's verse is, therefore, related on the one hand (I continue to postpone consideration of the Songs) to conversation. It has, particularly in the Epistles and Addresses, the informality, and flexibility, of such.

Sae I've begun to scrawl, but whether  
 In rhyme, or prose, or baith tegither,  
 Or some hotch-potch that's rightly neither,  
 Let time mak proof;  
 But I shall scribble down some blether  
 Just clean aff-loof.<sup>1</sup>

The inflections of the speaking voice are extremely subtly reproduced in the poem *To a Louse* (the masterpiece, I am inclined to think, among his shorter comic pieces). The movement of the poem, and the changes in the movement, correspond with the movements of the creature and suggest these:

• Na, faith ye yet! ye'll no be right  
 Till ye've got on it,

and so to the shift of attention in

O Jenny, dinna toss your head . . .

The various changes in the key (if I may use this

<sup>1</sup> *Second Epistle to Lapraik.*

analogy here) are another index of the poem's dramatic vitality. The 'flyting' manner of the second verse, for example, modulates into the brobdingnagian exaggerations of the third. A number of Burns's poems (*Holy Willie's Prayer*, for one, and even, perhaps, a majority of the Songs) are explicit dramatisations.

But to say that Burns's verse is related to conversation is only a half-truth. His verse is verse, a heightened thing, which is the result of several relations. He regarded himself (when writing in the vernacular) as a 'rhymster', and his 'rhyming', as such, is indeed so amazing that it demands consideration for itself.

For me, I'm on Parnassus' brink,  
Rivin' the words to gar them clink;  
Whyles dazed wi' love, whyles dazed wi' drink.<sup>1</sup>

This is hardly an adequate account. Burns's rhyming springs, rather, from a heightened consciousness of words as such (not so dissimilar from that from which the Elizabethan pun sprang), so that words become associated together (as also in the assonantal phrases I have already cited) through similarity of sound rather than of abstract 'meaning'.

Metrically, and otherwise, Burns's verse (I wish

<sup>1</sup> *Second Epistle to Davis.*

finally to suggest) is affected by Scottish folk-dance. It seems to me to bear something of the same kind of relation to the folk-dance as is borne by much Jacobean verse to Jacobean Stage-Play. This is certainly true of the vernacular Songs. Words, tune and dance are, in these, essentially one. The tunes to which Burns composed new, or rehandled old, words were as often as not reels and strathspeys. The dance affects the Songs through these tunes and (as I have suggested in a previous paragraph) the rest of his verse in less tangible ways.

I have postponed consideration of the Songs not merely because they were the labour of the last ten years of his life, but because I think they can best be understood in relation to the Kilmar-nock poems, which form the centre of his work. Burns, of course, worked on several different kinds of song, and these must be carefully distinguished. The songs he found in the Song-Books were very miscellaneous, and there are only a few fragments of folk-song even in Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany*. He writes one or two 'passable'<sup>1</sup> eighteenth century English popular humorous songs (after the manner of those of the *Beggar's Opera*, a selection of which are in the

<sup>1</sup> His own description.

*Miscellany*). But his 'literary' English songs are as bad as the rest of his English verse. The 'sensibility' cult (we are told that he carried about the *Man of Feeling* in his pocket) breaks in upon them, whereas it scarcely affects the vernacular songs. It is essential, therefore, that the vernacular songs should be considered separately, and along with the rest of his vernacular verse. They are the consummation of Scottish folk-song.

Burns's methods of composition of these have elsewhere been admirably gone into.<sup>1</sup> It was an immense labour, part creative, part critical, as many of his letters witness:

. . . *excellence* in the profession is the fruit of industry, labour, attention, and pains.

The qualities of these folk-songs are essentially those of the rest of his vernacular poetry—speeded up to the dance, till they become an ecstasy:

Comin' through the rye, poor body,  
 Comin' through the rye,  
 She draiglet a' her petticoatie,  
 Comin' through the rye.  
 Jenny's a' wat, poor body;  
 Jenny's seldom dry;

---

<sup>1</sup> Recently, by W. A. Edwards in his chapter on 'The Traditional Artist as Borrower' in his *Plagiarism* (Minority Press).

She draiglet a' her petticoatie,  
Comin' through the rye. . . .

We're a' dry wi' drinkin' o't,  
We're a' dry wi' drinkin' o't;  
The minister kiss'd the fiddler's wife,  
An' cauld na preach for thinkin' o't. . . .

She has an ee, she has but ane,  
. The cat has twa the very colour;  
Five rusty teeth, forbye a stump,  
A clapper tongue wad deave a miller;  
A whiskin beard about her mou',  
Her nose and chin they threaten ither;  
Such a wife as Willie had,  
I wadna gie a button for her. . . .

The weary pund, the weary pund,  
The weary pund o' tow;  
I think my wife will end her life  
Before she spin her tow.

There sat a bottle in a bole,  
Beyond the ingle lowe,  
And aye she took the tither souk  
To drouk the stowrie tow. . . .

The cardin' o't, the spinnin' o't;  
The warpin' o't, the winnin' o't;  
When ilka ell cost me a groat,  
The tailor staw the linin' o't. . . .

Green grow the rashes, O,  
Green grow the rashes, O;  
The sweetest hours that e'er I spend,  
Are spent amang the lasses, O!  
There's nought but care on ev'ry han',  
In ev'ry hour that passes, O;  
What signifies the life o' man,  
An' twere na for the lasses, O.

I here shift the emphasis from *O, my love is like a red, red rose, Of a' the airts, Bonnie Doon, Go, fetch to me a pint o' wine, and Mary Morrison* not because I wish finally to deny that these are the summit of achievement, but because I wish to bring them out of relation with nineteenth century lyric poetry and into relation with the comic background of the rest of Burns's vernacular work. It seems to me that only thus can a right appreciation of them be achieved. The world of Burns's vernacular poetry is a single complete world and, essentially, a world of comedy.

## The Scottish Ballads

As we have them in the Collections, the Scottish Ballads are poems chiefly of the eighteenth century. That they are quite different from other poems of that century may at first occasion surprise, but has its explanation. On the other hand it has been denied (by the primitivists<sup>1</sup>) that they are poems of that century at all. It has been argued that there is no reason to suppose they did not come into being centuries earlier than the century in which they were written down. It has also been observed that a good deal of the 'material' used is 'mediaeval'. But a poem and the language it is in are one and the same. Translated, it either becomes a new poem or ceases to be a poem at all. It is sufficient therefore to point to the language the ballads are in, which in most cases is at the point of development it was in the eighteenth century. (This is not merely a matter of language, but of sensibility. The ballads taken down after the beginning of

<sup>1</sup> I have read through the discussion on the origins of the ballads again, but I did not discover that it shed much light upon these poems themselves.

the nineteenth century show a distinct modification of sensibility.) Certainly the ballads are traditional. But so also is every poem—in its own degree.

I have isolated the Scottish Ballads from the other ballads in Child's Collection for the purposes of this consideration. Child includes several: *Judas*, *St. Stephen and King Herod*, which belong with mediaeval verse. *Robyn and Gwendlyn* is fifteenth century, and the finer of the Robin Hood Ballads also are rather earlier than the Scottish Ballads. The broadsheets that fluttered across the English country from the printing presses of 'the town' are more nearly contemporaneous with the Scottish Ballads. Scotland seems to have suffered less than England from the broadsheet contagion, being at that time less exposed, though nowadays newspapers, in Scotland as in England, have long since superseded ballads and broadsheets both. There are comparatively few Scottish Ballads in Percy's *Reliques*. But it was in Scotland that the Collectors of the eighteenth century found their finest poems.

The Scottish Ballads and the English Ballads are not wholly distinct from each other, but both are distinct from 'literary' English verse. The simultaneous existence of two distinct types of

verse points to the simultaneous existence of two distinct traditions. But that is no reason for supposing, as has been done, that the oral tradition (represented by the ballads of the Collections) and the 'literary' tradition were distinct to begin with, since an examination of the ballads themselves, their metre,<sup>1</sup> their conventions, shows them to be not mediaeval verse certainly, but a development, a 'popular'<sup>2</sup> development, from mediaeval verse. They were the verse which entertained the largely unlettered 'people', and they possess in themselves a life distinct and apart both from the 'literary' verse they were contemporaneous with and from the mediaeval verse they are a development from.

The Scottish Ballads therefore are, as every poem is, new and at the same time old. They are late (later, I think, than has been held) in that they belong mostly to the eighteenth century, but late also in that they bear on themselves the mark of a long ancestry. They are stiff with a Poetic Diction. To illustrate this Poetic Diction with an exhaustive list of phrases—*yellow hair, cherry cheeks,*

<sup>1</sup> Since metre of this kind was not introduced into English verse (from the French) until the fourteenth century, the ballads must have undergone surprising structural, as well as linguistic, changes, if one adopts the 'primitivist' view.

<sup>2</sup> 'Most of these ballads', says Bishop Percy of his *Reliques*, 'are of great simplicity, and seem to have been merely written [*sic*] for the people.'

*lily-white, rose-red, clay-cauld*—would be superfluous; the ballads themselves are the composite illustration of it; any analysis of the ballads is necessarily an analysis of it. Its strength is that it is to a considerable extent a stylisation of popular speech. It is simple: it is sensuous: and it retains something of the passion of popular speech. Its most evident ‘limitation’ as an artistic medium is perhaps its intractability to the expression of subtle shades of perception, its ready formation of simple, and at moments brutally effective, contrasts:

And clear, clear was her yellow hair  
Whereon the red blood dreeps,

not only in colour:

Shool'd the mools on his yellow hair.

When therefore the late eighteenth century began looking for a poetry which should be ‘simple, sensuous, and passionate’, it certainly found such in the ballads. What fascinated the late century were these ‘natural’ qualities and not merely that here was a Poetic Diction different from the prevailing Poetic Diction and therefore ‘fresh’. Bishop Percy in his introduction to his *Reliques* (1765) is still apologetic, but he indicates clearly enough what he, and his contemporaries, supposed were the merits of the ballads.

In a polished age, like the present, I am sensible that many of these reliques of antiquity will require great allowances to be made for them. Yet have they, for the most part, a pleasing simplicity, and many artless graces, which in the opinion of no mean critics<sup>1</sup> have been thought to compensate for the want of higher beauties, and, if they do not dazzle the imagination, are frequently found to interest the heart.

The description is to a certain extent just. We can all of us recall lines in the ballads which affect us suddenly and sharply (to express it more strongly than the Bishop) with an apparent utmost economy of means. Yet once the stylisation of the diction, especially in certain of the Scottish Ballads, is perceived the impression is more generally one of 'conventionality'. It will be sufficient to refer the reader to the finer of the *Twa Sisters (Binnorie)* variations. But the precise degree of conventional richness of one couplet from one ballad—

The bride cam tripping down the stair<sup>2</sup>  
Wi' the scales o' red gowd on her hair,

—cannot of course be appreciated unless one remembers the recurrences in other ballads of

<sup>1</sup> He names 'Mr. Addison, Mr. Dryden and the witty Lord Dorset in a footnote.

<sup>2</sup> *Hind Horn.*

‘brides’, ladies who ‘cam tripping ‘down the stair’, ‘red gowd’ and adorned ‘hair’.

This Poetic Diction is built into a Rhetoric—partly by means of repetitions.<sup>1</sup> The *Gil Brenton* (*Cospatrick*), the *Cruel Brother* and the *Babylon* variations come first to my mind as exemplifying it. What it indicates is the adaptation of speech to something outside itself, to declamation or to song. This also imposes upon it a certain rigidity which arrests any development from it, such as there was in Elizabethan dramatic verse from its earliest rhetorical ‘simplicity’ to its later close-down-to-speech complexity. But what in the ballads is lost in simplification is gained in effectiveness of dramatic presentation:

‘What news, what news?’ said young Hind Horn;  
 ‘No news, no news,’ said the old beggar man,  
 ‘No news,’ said the beggar, ‘No news at a’,  
 But there is a wedding in the king’s ha.’

What the repetition does is to increase the expectancy. This is resolved into a surprise. ‘A conversation’ seems to be reproduced in what seems a hard, unyielding medium, but with (as also, and more especially, in *Lamkin*) quite astonishingly effective results. The ballad dialogue

<sup>1</sup> But the importance of the refrain to the ballads as we have them has been over-emphasised, I think.

is both itself stylised and an integral part of the stylisation. 'All imaginative art', writes Yeats (in his remarkable essay *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*), 'remains at a distance, and this distance once chosen must be firmly held against a pushing world. . . . The arts which interest me, while seeming to separate from the world and us a group of figures, images, symbols, enable us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation' . . . seem, in fact, 'to recede from us into some more powerful life. . . .' The ballads are more than the beginnings of such an art.

When the eighteenth century found the ballads artistically 'rude' and 'unpolished' it may have been simply that the variations are for the most part very fragmentary, so that anything like a completely formed poem in the literary sense is rare. The ballads are sets of variations, fragmentary indeed, but in the extremely conventionalised medium I have spoken of. It is in this sense they are 'impersonal' apart altogether from their anonymity as to authorship.

Not that this medium itself remains constant. Even the Scottish Ballads, considered as a group by themselves, break up into lesser groups as soon as one looks at them closely enough. *Hughie the*

*Graeme, Dick o' the Cow, Jamie Telfer, Jock o' the Side, Kinmont Willie*, for example, form a group possessing robust characteristics of its own, considerably apart from what I have taken to be the central group. But these lesser groups retain a vital relation with each other and with the whole, which evidences a homogeneous community, in vital contact also with its neighbours but not dependent on imported stuff.

The mere existence of this ballad poetry among the largely unlettered Scottish 'people' in the eighteenth century is evidence also of the existence then of a popular taste that there is no equivalent of now among the lettered 'people' either in Scotland or in England.<sup>1</sup> The contemporary popular taste as represented by the contemporary popular entertainment (popular fiction, popular films, jazz music) is of a very much lower order. There is now such a gap between it and the literary tradition that it is difficult to know how long the literary tradition itself, deprived of sustenance from beneath, can persist.

But more particular evidence of the quality of popular taste a generation or two ago is provided by a comparison between the variations of any

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Robert Graves is interested in the 'ballads' that came into existence among the British troops during the war of 1914, but these are the merest drivel, as he would agree.

ballad (such as was recently made by Professor Gerould). Between the eight variations of the two opening lines of the *Unquiet Grave* (which Professor Gerould sets down) there is indeed very little to choose. This is the case also with an astonishingly large proportion of the ballad variations. Whether they were always the result of forgetfulness or not (it is very doubtful) they exhibit an astonishingly high degree of artistic competence to have been so widespread. Whoever was responsible for them could substitute lines as good for the lines which were either forgotten or not. They exhibit in practice a popular taste acquired, 'quite unconsciously, through long familiarity with ballads. My reason for doubting whether the variations arose simply from the necessity for filling up gaps in memory, rather than from some deeper necessity, may become clear from a comparison between two passages from two variations of the *Cruel Mother*:

CHILD B. As she was going to the church,  
She saw a sweet babe in the porch.

O sweet babe, and thou were mine,  
I wad cleed thee in the silk so fine.

O mother dear, when I was thine,  
You did na prove to me sae kind.

CHILD C. She has howked a hole baith deep and wide,

She has put them in baith side by side.

She has covered them oer wi a marble stane  
Thinking she would gang maiden hame.

As she was walking by her fath̄er's castle wa,  
She saw twa pretty babes playing at the ba.

O bonnie babes, gin ye were mine,  
I would dress you up in satin fine.

O cruel mother, we were thine . . .

These variations are in fact two independent poems. There is here a difference of vision.

This suggests also the nature of what, I think, one learns to look for in the Scottish Ballads. When the fragments belonging to the group are set together (not that one supposes they were ever anything else than fragmentary) portions of the outlines of a pattern within that of the conventionalised medium become discernible. What these form the very fragmentary revelation of is a folk-mythology. It is, I wish tentatively to suggest, the central thing in the Scottish Ballads, from which a complete understanding of them must proceed. It is here:

She's gane into the Jew's garden  
Where the grass grew lang and green:

She powd an apple red and white  
To wyle the young thing in.<sup>1</sup>

It is also here:

I'll show you where the white lilies grow  
On the banks of Italie.

And later in the same poem:<sup>2</sup>

'O what hills are yon, yon pleasant hills,  
That the sun shines sweetly on?'

'O yon are the hills of heaven,' he said,  
Where you will never won.'

'O whaten a mountain is yon,' she said,  
'All so dreary wi frost and snow?'

'O yon is the mountain of hell,' he said,  
'Where you and I will go.'

and it is, wizened, here:

She's turned me into an ugly worm  
And gard me toddle about the tree.<sup>3</sup>

It is a symbolism which is unmistakable wherever it occurs—the green garden, the apple, the braid, braid road across the lily leven (*Thomas the Rhymer*) or down by yon sunny fell (*Queen of Elflan's Nourice*), the rose broken from the tree (*Tam Lin*), the nut broken from the tree (*Hind*

<sup>1</sup> *Hugh of Lincoln.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Demon Lover.* (*The Carpenter's Wife.*)

<sup>3</sup> *Alison Gross.*

*Etin*), the place 'at the foot of our Lord's knee 'set about wi gilly-flowers' where women go who die in child-birth (*Sweet William's Ghost*). I find what corresponds with it in Bunyan, whose work is the expression of a folk-mythology which is no merely derivative from the Authorised Version. But I seem to find the same quality of vision individualised, in Blake.

It is at this point that it becomes necessary to stress the fundamental difference between the Scottish Ballads and the Romantic Poetry of the nineteenth century (with which work Blake is also, I think, wrongly associated). That poetry took over for its own purposes a quantity of what may be described as the 'machinery' of the ballads. Its Poetic Diction is derived, through Coleridge and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, almost as much from that of the ballads (chiefly because of their apparent 'picturesque' mediaevalism) as from Spenser and Milton. But this Poetic Diction is cut off from the vigour—

She stickit him like a swine

—of the popular speech which the Poetic Diction of the ballads is to a considerable extent a stylisation of. Correspondingly there is nothing in common between the vital, if very fragmentary,

vision of the Scottish Ballads, and the insubstantial dream of nineteenth century poetry.

The ballad art, like other art, seems 'to separate from the world and us a group of figures, images, symbols' and thereby 'enables us to pass . . . into a deep of the mind'. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that nineteenth century 'appreciation' subtly externalised (and sentimentalised) the significance of these 'figures, images, symbols', even those which most appealed to it:

And he saw neither sun nor moon  
But he heard the roaring of the sea.<sup>1</sup>

has a 'definite' significance in its context.

'Get dancers here to dance', she said,  
    'And minstrels for to play,  
For here's my young son, Florentine,  
    Come here wi me to stay . . .'

For naething coud the companie do,  
    Nor naething coud they say,  
But they saw a flock o' pretty birds  
    That took their bride away.<sup>2</sup>

There is more than a nursery-tale significance in, for example, the birds—that is to say, in *Cow-me-doo* as well as in the *Twa Corbies*; rather,

<sup>1</sup> *Thomas the Rhymer*.

<sup>2</sup> *Earl of Mar's Daughter*.

there is the significance there often is, latent, in a nursery-tale which has been folk-tale.

If the symbolism of which I have spoken is kept in mind, the other images too assume, in varying degrees, a symbolical value in relation to it. The images of finery, for example, particularly of dress, which are so frequent in the Scottish Ballads, are then recognised to possess a symbolical value as profound as in Bunyan ('... he that is clad in Silk and Velvet'). That finery is associated with folly, pride and death. It is Vanity.

Fair Margaret was a rich ladye  
 The king's cousin was she;  
 Fair Margaret was a rich ladye  
 As vain as vain could be.

She ward her wealth on the gay cleedin  
 That comes frae yont the sea,  
 She spent her time frae morning till night  
 Adorning her fair bodye.

Ae night she sate in her stately ha,  
 Kaimin her yellow hair . . .<sup>1</sup>

This religious sense is behind the peculiar satiric element (a fierce exultant derision almost) in the lines:

O our Scots Nobles were richt laith  
 To weet their cork-heild schoone;

---

<sup>1</sup> *Proud Lady Margaret.*

Bot lang oyre a the play wer playd  
 Thair hats they swam aboone.

O lang, lang may their ladies sit,  
 Wi thair fans into their hand,  
 Or ere they se Sir Patrick Spence  
 Cam sailing to the land.

O lang, lang may the ladies stand  
 Wi thair gold kems in their hair,  
 Waiting for their ain deir lords,  
 For they'll se thame na mair.<sup>1</sup>

And this religious sense is present also, pityingly and wonderingly, in

But she put on the glistering gold  
 To shine through Edinburgh town,

in its *Marie Hamilton* context—a poem which seems to me charged with this religious sense.

The ballads are concerned, it is true, almost entirely with the circle of the life of the body, with birth, instinctive action, death (often violent death), and the decay of the body. Again, they present on the one hand (as W. P. Ker and others noted) images of a princely grandeur erected out of earth, and on the other hand, its counterpart, the earthiness of death and decay. These images are contrasted and associated, if not explicitly, by

<sup>1</sup> Version from Percy's *Reliques*.

their mutual presence. The total effect is thus sombre. It has been customary to speak of the 'paganism' of the Scottish Ballads. I suppose I mean the same thing, but I should prefer to describe them (keeping in mind the symbolism I have spoken of) as, in a profound sense, 'religious'.<sup>1</sup> They embody, in any case, very fragmentarily indeed, but with startling immediacy, a vision of human life which sprang apparently from the imagination of the 'folk'.

<sup>1</sup> The beautiful English specifically religious folk-poems (*St. Stephen and King Herod*, *The Cherry-Tree Carol*, for example) require to be appreciated separately and along with the Miracle Plays.

## Nineteenth Century Scotland in Allegory

IT was doubtless the vogue of idyllic 'kailyard' fiction that provoked George Douglas to the prosaic 'realism' of *The House with the Green Shutters*. But what appears to sustain it is an almost terrifying dissatisfaction with the Scotland itself he had known. The book not merely implies a criticism of certain other books that in any case are no longer read—that it killed the 'kailyard' type of fiction is its historical importance—it implies a radical *social criticism* amounting to an indictment, and it is as such that it may have its present importance; for while I would not admit it to the highest rank as a work of the novelist's art—to the rank, that is to say, of *Wuthering Heights*, the novel with which one immediately compares it in one's mind—its value *as a work of art* seems to me to depend on the value of the social criticism it implies. As a 'tragedy' detached from these implications it seems to me at once 'conventional' as if its author were striving to conform to some exterior idea of 'tragedy' which he supposes him-

self perhaps to have got from the Greeks. Expectation is preferred to surprise according to the best models; the 'bodies' are thought of as filling the role of the 'chorus', and so on. The scenes of pity (not weakly indulged) and terror—horror rather—towards the end would appear to justify it as a 'tragedy' in this conventional sense. But the source of the power the book undoubtedly has, can, it seems to me, be shown to exist in reality in the terrible nature of its social criticism.

The novel presents a number of different individuals—centering in the members of the Gourlay family—in the setting of a small local community—that of Barbie—which is in a late phase of disintegration. Whether or not Barbie was characteristic of the Scotland of the nineteenth century must be left to the social historian to confirm; in any case 'Barbie' has, I think, a general application. 'Barbie has been a decaying burgh for thirty years', we are told explicitly in the beginning of the second chapter. To call Barbie a 'community' is indeed to extend the meaning of the word; it has ceased to be an 'organic community'; there is no longer a fruitful co-operation between its members. The 'bodies' who represent the last of the local public opinion and should have been, without necessarily knowing it, the guiding and con-

trolling centre of the community are—destructive worms bred out of the decaying organism—idly malicious gossipers and back-biters. ‘The Bend o’ the Brae was the favourite stance of the bodies: here they forgathered every day to pass judgment on the town’s affairs.’ This is a specimen of their conversation:

‘Losh,’ said Sandy Toddle, ‘yonder’s the Free Kirk minister going past the Cross! Where’ll *he* be off till at this hour of the day? He’s not often up so soon.’ . . .

‘What road’th he taking?’ lisped Deacon Allardyce, craning past Brodie’s big shoulder to get a look.

‘He’s stoppit to speak to Widow Wallace. What will he be saying to *her*?’

‘She’s a greedy bodie that Mrs. Wallace: I wouldna wonder but she’s speiring him for bawbees.’

‘Will he take the Skeighan Road, I wonder?’

‘Or the Fechars?’

‘He’s a great man for gathering gowans and other sic trash. He’s maybe for a dander up the burn juist. They say he’s a great botanical man.’

‘Ay,’ said Brodie, ‘paidling in a burn’s the ploy for him. He’s a weanly gowk.’ . . .

‘I’m demmed if he hasn’t taken the Skeighan Road!’ said Sandy Toddle, who had kept his eye on the minister. . . .

‘The Skeighan Road! the Skeighan Road! Who’ll

he be going to see in that airt? Will it be 'Templandmuir?'

'Gosh, it canna be Templandmuir; he was there no later than yestreen!'

'Here's a man coming down the brae!' announced Johnny Coe, in a solemn voice, as if a man 'coming down the brae' was something unusual. In a moment every head was turned to the hill.

'What's yon he's carrying on his shoulder?' pondered Brodie.

'It looks like a boax,' said the Provost slowly, bending every effort of eye and mind to discover what it really was. . . .

(Chapter V.)

The quality of their 'judgments' may be appreciated in the following:

Drucken Wabster and Brown the ragman came round the corner, staggering.

'Young Gourlay's drunk!' blurted Wabster—and reeled himself as he spoke.

'Is he a wee fou?' said the Deacon eagerly.

'Wee be damned,' said Wabster. 'He's as fou as the Baltic Sea! If you wait here, you'll be sure to see him! He'll be round the corner directly.'

'De-ar me, is he so bad as that?' said the ex-Provost, raising his hands in solemn reprobation. He raised his eyes to heaven at the same time, as if it pained them to look on a world that endured the burden of a young Gourlay. 'In broad daylight, too!' he sighed. 'De-ar me, has he come to this?' . . .

‘I kenned young Gourlay was on the fuddle when I saw him swinging off this morning in his great-coat,’ cried Sandy Toddle. ‘There was debauch in the flaps o’ the tails o’t.’

‘Man, have you noticed that too?’ cried another eagerly. ‘He’s aye warst wi’ the coat on!’ . . .

‘We may as well wait and see young Gourlay going by,’ said the ex-Provost. ‘He’ll likely be a sad spectacle.’

‘Ith auld Gourlay on the threet the nicht?’ cried the Deacon eagerly. ‘I wonder will he thee the youngster afore he gets hame! Eh, man’—he bent his knees with staring delight—‘eh, man, if they would only meet forenenst uth! Hoo!’ . . .

(Chapter XXI.)

Yet the ‘bodies’ are in a sense what has become of the past, and as traditional figures are significant, as well as richly comic. The Deacon, and for example (at the beginning of Chapter XXII) David Aird, the City bounder about to return to the City after finding Barbie ‘too quiet for his tastes’ (‘Thank God, we’ll soon be in civilisation’), form a significant comic contrast; but it is the Deacon alone who is satirically aware of the other.

The laird and the minister, who would have been shown as somewhere near the centre had the novel been written in the eighteenth century, are little more here than dots on the periphery. The

laird has sunk into identity with the surrounding commonality. He is proud to have an evening's 'sederunt' with old Gourlay—at least until he marries a miller's daughter (of a different kind from Tennyson's—'Her voice went with the skirl of an east wind through the rat-riddled mansion of the Hallidays'). The minister, the Rev. Mr. Struthers, is an exceptionally stupid peasant—he has taken ten years to get into the Church and has had a reverence for the university ever since; though what he reverences is mainly the wonder of its administrative machinery. The scene (Chapter XX) in which he congratulates the young prize-winner ('Ability to write is a splendid thing for the Church') is one of the richest in comedy. As for the schoolmaster he 'rarely leaves' his studying of the theory of Political Economy—

'Ay,' he said dryly, 'there's a wheen gey cuddies in Barbie!' and he went to his stuffy little room to study *The Wealth of Nations*.

—a study which being disconnected from what is happening around him in Barbie is socially barren.

Here then is a society without aristocratic or ecclesiastical or even pedagogic leadership or guidance. Presbyterianism itself is no longer substantial; it persists vestigially as some of its effects.

It has left behind a certain hardness and bitterness in character and conversation, an absence of sap and sweetness:

‘It’s a fine morning, Mr. Gourlay.

‘There’s naething wrong with the morning,’ grunted Gourlay, as if there was something wrong with the Deacon.

The Provost’s ‘Huts, man, dinna sweer sae muckle!’ is a kind of unconscious reminiscence of the grave reproofs of elders. The ironic technique of the traditional speech goes on functioning out of relation to its proper object.

‘What’s that you’re burying your nose in now?’ and if she faltered ‘It’s the Bible,’ ‘Hi,’ he would laugh, ‘you’re turning godly in your auld age. Weel, I’m no saying but it’s time!’

The skeleton of Presbyterianism can seem terribly forbidding:

Heavy Biblical pictures, in frames of gleaming black like the splinters of a hearse, were hung against a dark ground.

There being no longer a community holding together and controlling its members, the sheer individual, Gourlay, of peasant stock, stupid, but of tremendous dourness and brute force of ‘char-

acter', thrusts upward. He builds the House with the Green Shutters on the top of the hill. It represents his attempt at self-sufficiency—the house apart. 'It is his character in stone and lime,' and it dominates the town. Since the public opinion—as represented by the 'bodies'—is impotent to control him, the malevolence of the 'bodies' grows monstrous against him. With shakes of the head they judge Gourlay's house as Vanity and 'Pride that *will* have a downcome.' But the traditional judgment loses most of its force from being made the vehicle of their petty personal spite.

Gourlay maintains his position till the advent of another individual, Wilson, who, although a native of Barbie, has been—significantly—*away* for an interval of years.

In his appearance there was an air of dirty and pretentious well-to-do-ness. It was not shabby gentility. It was like the gross attempt to dress of your well-to-do publican.

He introduces the familiar modern 'business methods. (They are described in some detail in Chapters X, XI and XIII.)

Now the shops of Barbie (the drunken man's shop and the dirty man's shop always excepted, of course) had usually been lowbrowed little places with faded

black scrolls above the door, on which you might read in dim gilt letters (or it might be white)

‘Licens’d To Sell Tea & Tobacco.’

When you mounted two steps and opened the door, a bell of some kind went in the interior, and an old woman in a mutch, with big specs slipping down her nose, would come up a step from a dim little room behind, and wiping her sunken mouth with her apron—she had just left her tea—would say, ‘What’s your wull the day, Sir?’ and if you said your ‘wull’ was tobacco, she would answer, ‘Ou, Sir, I dinna sell ocht now but the tape and the sweeties.’ And then you went away, sadly.

With the exception of the dirty man’s shop, and the drunken man’s shop, that kind of shop was the Barbie kind of shop. But Wilson changed all that.

Gourlay, although a type of the individualism which both followed from and contributed to the break-up of the Scottish community, is himself thoroughly Scottish. Wilson is no longer Scottish, but nondescript modern commercialism and ‘progress’.

The downfall of the Gourlay family gains in significance from being a particular instance of a more general downfall. The house of Gourlay looks well enough from the outside and in its yard—

A cock pigeon strutted round, puffing his gleam-

ing breast and *rookety-cooing* in the sun. Large, clear drops fell slowly from the spout of a wooden pump, and splashed upon a flat stone.

—but inside it is in filthy disorder, for Gourlay has a sluttish wife, and his son and daughter are ailing in mind and in body; the fruit of Gourlay's pride is internally rotten. Gourlay's attempt to found a self-contained house and family dominating Barbie has to come to nothing sooner or later in any case, for young Gourlay, his son and heir, is a 'weakling'. Yet we are shown clearly enough that brought up in more favourable conditions there is sufficient in young Gourlay to have brought forth some fruit. He is gifted with a wealth of sensuous perceptiveness represented in passages of a prose that in this respect reminds one oddly of Katherine Mansfield's.

But as young Gourlay's schoolmaster and, later, his professor perceive, he is without the mind and character to use this wealth so as to make it something other than an incubus. The difficulties of the sensitive adolescent Scot are dealt with in a way that seems to anticipate what *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* does for the Irish adolescent. In the case of the adolescent Scot there is almost no tradition, no sympathetic understanding community to guide him; prematurely born,

he is subjected only to the brutal will of his father and the weak indulgence of his mother. Not that the novelist attempts to invoke our sympathy for him. He is dealt with as unsympathetically as almost everyone else in the book. It is part of the bracing effect of the book that it is almost wholly unsympathetic. Douglas is a stringent moralist, scrupulously searching out moral failure. As a moralist he is perhaps too *explicit* for a novelist. But as that is not a fault of much modern work, it is almost to be welcomed here as a sign of health than otherwise. A moral pre-occupation in the finest sense of 'moral' may be held to be an essential for a novelist, perhaps for any artist.

Young Gourlay is sent to Edinburgh University to be made into a minister. ““Eh, but it’s a grand thing a gude education! You may rise to be a minister,” his mother had said when he was sent to the secondary school. “It’s a’ he’s fit for,” his father had growled.’ Old Gourlay has no illusions as to the sacred profession. He wants to put his son into it as an expedient for saving the falling fortunes of his house. At this point, then, the focus is shifted from a small rural burgh to the very capital of Scotland itself and to what might be expected to be the centre of its cultural

life, Edinburgh University. Young Gourlay at Edinburgh is partly a test of what Edinburgh and its university had to offer. It might not have been too much to expect that here if anywhere the youth might have found the conditions, lacking in Barbie, favourable for the multiplication of his single talent. Douglas's picture of Edinburgh and its university is no flattering one. Edinburgh offers the 'weakling' only too much encouragement in his suicidal tendency to whisky addiction. The lecture rooms, where as one of a mob of rowdy students he has his sole opportunity of confronting his professor, are twice presented in the condition of a bear-garden. 'Auld Tam', the Scots professor, is indeed a figure to be reckoned with. He is representative of the Scots professor of the days before Scots professors were mostly Englishmen from Oxford and Cambridge, and he possesses powers of mind and character (he quells the unruly students with the humorous acerbity of his tongue) which we are bound to respect. Being also a representative of the tradition of philosophy and abstract speculation which we associate more especially with the Edinburgh of the eighteenth century, he is amusingly inadequate when attempting to deal with something so concrete and particular as *Macbeth*. What effective

culture there' might seem still to be in Edinburgh is represented by the Allan circle. There seems to me a serious weakness betrayed by Douglas in his portrayal of this circle (Chapter XVII). The novelist seems to accept it almost at its own valuation. If, as appears, Douglas intends it to be regarded as really 'brilliant', he does not succeed in convincingly representing it as such. Could it have been that Douglas, in general so without illusions, was himself impressed by the sort of thing represented by Tarmillan, the most 'brilliant' apparently of the Allan circle? The superficial, even vulgar, cleverness of the wit of Tarmillan's conversation is something sadly inferior to the corresponding thing there is reason to believe there was in the Edinburgh of the eighteenth century. 'The Howff'—the pub which night after night lures young Gourlay to it out of his dismal room and away from his uncongenial books—represents what had become of the tradition to which at an earlier phase Burns's poetry belongs. It is a survival from the older Scotland; as is the grosset-fair and such an episode (and such a vocabulary) as the following:

They roared and sang till it was a perfect affront to God's day, and frae sidie to sidie they swung till the splash-brods were shreighing on the wheels. At

a quick turn o' the road they wintled owre; and there they were, sitting on their doups in the atom's o' the gig, and glowering frae them!

But for young Gourlay 'the Howff' is no longer an expression of the robust enjoyment of bucolic life; it is merely a refuge to shrink into from the terrors that assail his sensitivity. The novel ends, inevitably, on the notes of Insanity, Disease, Murder, Suicide. The tendency is not only in young Gourlay; it is in the whole of the society of which the novel is a grim representation. This seems to me the nature of the tragedy of the novel, by virtue of which it may prove permanently applicable.

What is to be one's final word on the book as a contribution to literature? The quality of a novel is, of course, that of its prose both locally and as a cumulative organic whole. The passages extracted above give a fair idea of Douglas's prose at its working best. The purple patch about the thunderstorm at young Gourlay's birth (Chapter VI) might be extracted, together with its echo later (Chapter XIV) that so terrified the truant boy, if the comparison with *Wuthering Heights* is to be insisted on. But Douglas's prose is not always so good. At times it appears insufficiently controlled—emotions 'seethe' and 'boil'—and on

the other hand, while frequently exhibiting a rich particularity, it occasionally drops into something like the journalist being 'literary'. That the book was Douglas's first (and only) novel may explain its immaturities, as its astonishing power may seem to have offered great promise of future achievement; but it is not easy to believe that the life of a journalist in London would have qualified him to write a greater Scottish novel; and in any case considerations of what he might have done ought not to deflect the critical judgment on what he did do. That Douglas's prose should so consistently preclude sympathy is of course its unusual strength. If that unsympathy could have been converted into a purely artistic detachment and sustained as such, the novel would have been a great work of art. Unfortunately, as an examination of its prose at once confirms, the unsympathy is not always that of detached and serenely poised art, but seems at times to proceed from an unresolved personal animus. There is not space to extract the opening passage of the book for examination, but I may perhaps refer to it. It is Douglas's prose at its best, but even here the 'silly' of 'The silly *tee-bee* echoed up the street' is perhaps a sign of this insecurity. There may be some justice also in the common dismissal of the

book as 'merely depressing'. Douglas does indeed refer to certain positives in at least one place—

To bring a beaten and degraded look into a man's face . . . is an outrage on the decency of life, an offence to natural religion, a violation of the human sanctities.

—but these positives, though referred to, are nowhere strongly and positively realised in the book. If they had been it would perhaps have been a wiser, because more complete, book. Nevertheless, if not a great novel, it is, because of the clarity of the social criticism it implies, a very remarkable one, perhaps the only very remarkable Scottish novel, not excepting the earlier Scottish novels of Walter Scott and John Galt.

## The Present and C. M. Grieve

THERE are some reasons why this last chapter might have been the first. The present grows out of the past, and is only rightly to be understood in relation to the past; but equally the past only exists for us in and through our present, and only has present value in so far as it can be brought to bear on the problems of the present. For that reason all observations (unless they are to be merely academic) must begin and end with a concern for the present.

In order the better to measure the immediate present it will be an aid to hold in mind Dunbar as representative of the great phase of Scots; and to assist this, some recapitulation may first of all be permitted. (1) Dunbar is an accomplished metrist. To say this is to say something more important than is commonly intended. It is to imply his maturity in the sense that he is at the outcome—almost, but not quite, pushed outside his material—rather than at the beginning of a growth of poetic tradition. His arrangements of words have behind them a weight of traditional

sanction. (2) His forms and conventions, modified as they were by his particular language, were European, the expression of a European consciousness, in the sense that they were common to the poets of Mediaeval Europe modified by the language—English, French, Italian and Church Latin—of each. (3) The particular language he wrote in was not French, Italian, Latin (nor on the other hand Gaelic); it was Scots. The second and third of these commonplaces imply a poëtry that is mediaeval and European and at the same time Scots. It is in this sense that Burns is provincial in comparison with Dunbar. It is not merely that Dunbar is a 'court poet', Burns the culmination of a 'popular' tradition. The Scotland of Burns no longer formed part of a European background. Today Mr. C. M. Grieve (Hugh McDiarmid) attempting to write a new Scots poetry is a forlorn and isolated figure, the European background having vanished, and Scotland with it. When therefore Grieve reiterated in his early days 'Not Burns—Dunbar!' no doubt his instinct guided him right. There is, it seems, a better reason for wishing to go back to Dunbar than the negative one that it is necessary to get away from Burns.

On the other hand, it should not be surprising

that, however much Grieve may have wanted to get back to Dunbar, there is little evidence in his verse—and this after all is the ultimate test—that he has succeeded. ‘Dunbar,’ said Grieve, ‘is singularly modern.’ Modern in the sense that every poet capable of being realised afresh as significant Dunbar certainly is, or might be. It is in order that he may be felt to be ‘modern’ in this sense that it is necessary to emphasise that he is ‘mediaeval’ and that his connections with the poets of the Renaissance are comparatively few and slender,<sup>1</sup> and with poets later than the Renaissance non-existent.

Dunbar’s achievement in the poems which are the core of his work is his combination of formalism with a closeness to speech. It is on this speech norm that his range, the ease of his transitions, and much else, depends. To write in Scots a poetry that is based on living speech (as the major part of Dunbar is), or even to write a Scots poetry that is based on a language of immediate literary practice (as is *The Goldyn Targe*), is no longer possible. There cannot be a Scottish

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Allen Tate once suggested a connection between Dunbar and Donne’s Satires through Sackville’s *Induction*. There is indeed a superficial resemblance since all three start from a mediaeval sense of human depravity and the vanity of earthly things, but that only serves to emphasise how singularly little there is in common between the textures of their verse.

poetry in the fullest sense unless there is in the fullest sense a Scottish speech. 'What survives of such a speech among what survives of the peasantry is in its last stages and is even something its speakers have learned to be half-ashamed of. That is why there has been no Scottish literature (and indeed no literature in Scotland of any kind) since the eighteenth century.

When a language is destroyed it may be taken for granted that it is not only a language, it is a distinctive traditional life that has been destroyed, and with it all forms of the traditional art that springs from that life. There is little that is positively Scottish in the life of the modern cities, Glasgow, Edinburgh, or that distinguishes them from other cities of the modern world. The daily routine of the towns-people in factory, office and shop, the distractions provided for their leisure, are not distinctive. The country—much of it has of course been blotted out by the nondescript industrial areas—is penetrated by the motoring roads and has ceased to possess its own life apart from the towns. The country people are learning to share by means of bus and wireless the town-distractions. In their turn the cities overflow into the country in motor-cars on fine days and make of it their recreation ground. The 'life' the

country witnesses on these days is a life alien to it, imposed upon it, disfiguring it.

There can be no literature unless there is further not merely a reading-public, but a *discriminating* reading-public, however small—such as existed in Scotland in the fifteenth century and again in the eighteenth. The evidence that in the fifteenth century—the century in which the universities of St. Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen had their origins in the mediaeval Catholic Church—there existed such a cultivated public and that its culture was both European and Scottish, is the poetry of Henryson, Dunbar, Douglas. It may or may not have had its immediate centre in the court—Henryson is no court poet, and Dunbar, who is even more various than Henryson, is a court poet and a poet of several other kinds—but at any rate it was something that was definitely there. The Edinburgh of the eighteenth century held in juxtaposition a poet so Scottish as Robert Fergusson and an eighteenth century European in David Hume. Even so late as the beginning of the nineteenth century there were the Edinburgh reviews. But today? The answer to the question why modern Scotland is essentially indifferent not only to Scots literature but to literature, would be very much the same as the answer to the question why

the modern world is indifferent to literature. The same forces operate throughout the modern world.

The problem is how to recreate, or find some equivalent for, the tradition, or traditions, which have been destroyed. In the circumstances, the efforts of Grieve to recreate the literary tradition seem almost superhuman. So many names later became associated with the Scottish Literary Movement, initiated by Grieve in sincerity, that it became difficult to distinguish it from a publicity ramp. Many names were associated, if not quite similarly, with the Irish Literary Movement. There remain from that the positive achievements of Synge and Yeats. The fully Irish achievement of Synge was evidently still possible at that time in Ireland. Synge stylised Irish peasant speech that was still spoken. But if a poetry anything like so magnificently vital as that of the later Yeats, even if it were not so Scottish as that of Yeats is Irish, were being composed in Scotland, it would be more than justifiable to talk of literature, even if not in the fullest sense Scottish literature, in Scotland again. One finds oneself forced back upon the work of Grieve.

The weakness of such of Grieve's work as is in his 'Synthetic Scots' can at once be traced back to the fact that he himself does not speak 'Syn-

thetic Scots', nor does anyone else. His medium is not a spoken medium. It remains at least doubtful whether anyone, even with Grieve's gifts, is qualified to accomplish much by starting so far back as first to create, or recreate, the language in which his poetry must be written. It has to be remembered, however, that so great has been the rate of change that the childhood of such men as Grieve and his friend, the composer F. G. Scott, was probably much more Scottish than their adult life now is. Secondly, it has to be remembered that Grieve is resurrecting words which are embedded in what might be called his own racial past, endeavouring to find new powers of life in them, and to enrich the present with them. But some of the English poems in his *Second Hymn to Lenin* volume are *at least* as good as anything Grieve has written in Scots. The equivalent could not be said of Burns.

Grieve's problem included not only a problem of language but also a problem of finding poetic modes he could make use of. His failure to find such modes, or to persist in the development of such as he found, is one cause of the dissipation of his powers. He does not in actual fact (in spite of what he wrote of the necessity for doing so) begin from Dunbar but (in *Sangshan*) from the

folk-ballad. The little that is in the Scottish folk-ballad mode is almost the only successful portion of the *Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*:

O wha's the bride that cairries the bunch  
 O' thistles blinterin' white?  
 Her cuckold bridegroom little dreids  
 What he sall ken this nicht.

For closer than gudeman can come  
 And closer to'r than hersel',  
 Wha didna need her maidenheid  
 Has wrocht his purpose fell.

O wha's been here afore me, lass,  
 And hoo did he get in?  
 —*A man that deed or I was born.*  
*This evil thing has din.*

And left, as it were, on a corpse  
 Your maidenheid to me?  
 —*Nae lass, gudeman, sin' Time began*  
*'S hed ony mair to gi'e.*

*But I can gi'e ye kindness, lad,*  
*And a pair o' willin' hands*  
*And you sall ha'e my briests like stars,*  
*My limbs like willow wands.*

*And on my lips ye'll heed nae mair*  
*And in my hair forget,*  
*The seed o' a' the men that in*  
*My virgin womb ha'e met.*

Millions o' wimmen bring forth in pain  
 Millions o' bairns that are no' worth ha'en.

Wull ever a wumman be big again  
 Wi's muckle's a Christ? Yech, there's nae sayin',

Gin that's the best that you ha'e comin',  
 Fegs but I'm sorry for you, wumman!

Yet a'e thing's certain—Your faith is great.  
 Whatever happens, you'll no' be blate! . . .

Mary lay in jizzen  
 As it were clraith o' gowd,  
 But it's in orra duds  
 Ilka ither bairntime's row'd.

Christ had never toothick,  
 Christ was never seeck,  
 But Man's a fiky bairn  
 Wi' bellythraw, ripples, and worm-i'-the-cheek! . . .

There are three poems in the passage, but each is a modification, an individualised use, of a Scottish folk-ballad mode. This (except possibly for some passages of satire on Burns Clubs and St. Andrew's Night Dinners) seems to me to represent almost all of value that has come out of Grieve's really admirable attempt to write a new Scots poetry. The attempt (forming the bulk of Grieve's verse of this phase) to intellectualise Scots poetry (this may have been what he meant

by going beyond Burns to Dunbar) seems to me unsuccessful so far in spite of the attendant strength of his physiological imagery. In *Circumjack Cirencrastus* the passage of adaptation of Rilke (Rilke must have been unknown in Scotland in the year Grieve's adaptation was made) stands out for its technical subtlety. The impact of the poetry of Rilke has acted as a condenser to give a temporary form to the formlessness. But already this passage is in English. The only passages of interest in Scots in *Circumjack Cirencrastus* are the personal passages on his bitter experiences of the underworld which is modern journalism. But of the volume *Second Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems* (1935) I should be prepared to hazard the opinion that Grieve has at last really found himself. The best poems in this volume resemble certain occasional aspects of Blake and also of the Shelley of the *Mask of Anarchy* (compare their use of the political broadsheet technique), particularly in an anger finding direct, naïve expression. This particular naïveté is a much more difficult achievement than may at first appear. It marks the attainment of a difficult sincerity. It is the sign (unless I am mistaken) of an intellectual and spiritual distinction. In so far as there is any influence perceptible it is possibly that of the Yeats

of some of the poems of the *Green Helmet*, *Responsibilities*, *The Wild Swans of Coole* phase, though Grieve is without Yeats's complexity. But the voice is quite individual.

There is a monstrous din of the sterile who contribute nothing

To the great end in view, and the future fumbles,  
A bad birth, not like the child in that gracious home  
Heard in the quietness turning in its mother's womb,  
A strategic mind already, seeking the best way  
To present himself to life, and at last, resolved,  
Springing into history quivering like a fish,  
Dropping into the world like a ripe fruit in due time.

I would refer the reader especially to *Folly*, *In the Children's Hospital*, *Another Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries*, *Like Achilles and Priam*, *In the Slaughterhouse*, *The Salmon Leap*, *The End of Usury*, *The Two Parents*, *Reflections in an Ironworks*. But these poems are in English. What they gain by being by Grieve and perhaps by being, in so far as they are, Scottish, may be judged by comparison with the work of the much publicised group of Public School Communist poets there has been in England; the difference is primarily in the fundamental sincerity of Grieve's poems. The *Second Hymn to Lenin* itself—the only poem in Scots in the volume—seems to me to have the

distinction of being (I would not say an entirely satisfactory poem) the only really *contemporary* poem in Scots for many generations.

I have confined myself to a tentative and, perhaps, premature—as it must certainly seem severe—literary judgment on Grieve's verse. I have risked it only because I felt it must be attempted by someone, and this whole book has been, in a sense, an effort to qualify myself to make a contemporary judgment. As I look through again such of Grieve's work in prose and verse as is available to me, I am struck with admiration for the unusual powers of mind and spirit they display, though at every turn thwarted and frustrated. Partly his dissatisfaction and discontent is with an environment relentlessly hostile to the reality of art.

... but the better-off citizenry of Edinburgh still respect professional men almost as much as big business men; poets and writers however are another matter. It is not even a question of keeping them in their proper places; they have no place....

Dundee Art Gallery is a byword. Public money has been wasted on worthless pictures in vicious taste and atrocious pictures of ex-Lord Provosts and other public men form a large part of the collection. It is noteworthy that although Dundee has long been the centre of a struggling colony of Scottish artists

—men like Stewart Carmichael, Walter Grieve, David Foggie and others—they have got practically no civic encouragement, which has been lavished almost entirely on fashionable artists from the South, like Philip de Lazlo. . . .

It is by no accident that in the Shetlands, in Scotland, in England and elsewhere, there is an almost complete divorce between political and practical affairs, on the one hand, and poetry, philosophy and scholarship on the other, and that public life is in the hands of men with whom no creative artist worth a rap would waste a moment's time in associating. The hideous distress, barbarism, and hopelessness of our life are due to this divorce—to this appalling confusion of values—to all these worthy citizens of ours who would regard it as 'ballyhoo' to be told that social and economic regeneration depends very largely on sound cultural standards and that no country can have a decent economic and social order which has not good tastes in arts and letters and adequately pursues its own true creative spirit.

He turns and turns like a caged tiger. But through all his inconsistencies there is a consistency of direction—a devotion, a concentration of all his powers to the end in view. In this he shows a quite extraordinary strength of character. For no one is more aware of his tragedy than Grieve.

If Grieve finally succeeds in solving his problem it will not be only his own problem he will have

solved; he will have helped towards solving the problem of any other Scotsm<sup>an</sup> who may aspire to poetry (or, for that matter, prose). To return to the example of Yeats. There is a good deal that is Irish in Yeats's English. It may be assumed that, similarly, if a modern writer of Scottish antecedents succeeded in writing poetry of the English he spoke there would prove to be a good deal that is Scottish in that English. In so far as a writer is 'Scottish', his 'Scottishness', even if he is himself not conscious of it, will show itself in what he writes. This is certainly true of the writer who possesses the honesty of genius, and since there can be no literature without this kind of honesty it is true of anything that may justifiably be called literature. There was no more distinctively 'Scottish' writer than Dunbar. But it is unlikely that it was his primary and deliberate aim to be so. If the centre of interest, even in the case of a writer of Scottish antecedents, is in a literature that shall be 'Scottish', then the interest is not purely in literature and is not purely literary. A difficult problem of sincerity arises. As soon as a writer attempts to be something other than himself in what he writes there is a dissociation which is bound to show itself in a certain falsity in the writing. This is true of a Scottish writer who

attempts in his writing to be other than Scottish. But it is equally true of a writer of Scottish antecedents, whose ordinary conversation is in what is approximately English and whose share in intellectual discussion is also and more necessarily 'English' and who yet deliberately and self-consciously attempts to be 'Scottish' in some of the things he writes as distinct from nearly everything he says. I try here to suggest some of the dangers. I would not be taken as saying that if one's antecedents are Scottish it should not be one's endeavour to be as conscious of those antecedents as possible. On the contrary, it has been my ultimate contention that what has gone wrong is that most Scottish people have lost consciousness both of their Scottish antecedents and of their European antecedents, and of their Scottish antecedents and their European antecedents as having once been one. But to be deliberately and self-consciously 'Scottish' in one's writing is not to have regained that lost consciousness.

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